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The Heart of Hamlet's Mystery

LEAVENWORTH KANSAS

Translated from the German of

Karl Werder

By Elizabeth Wilder

With Introduction by W. J. Rolfe

"You would pluck out the heart of my mystery!"

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In Memoriam

KARL WERDER

PREFATORY NOTE.

This translation has largely grown from the interest excited in this country and abroad by the extracts from Werder's *Lectures on Hamlet* in Dr. Furness's admirable edition of the play.

The lectures, as delivered at the University of Berlin, included extended quotations and discussions upon various German theories of *Hamlet;* but as most of this matter had no necessary connection with the main subject, it was deemed best to limit the present version to Werder's presentation of his own theory, with only so much of his comments on opposing views as it seemed desirable to retain. For this reason the first lecture of the series was wholly omitted, and the translation begins with the second.

All lovers of Shakespeare will clearly perceive my grateful obligation to Dr. W. J. Rolfe,

both for the masterly guidance in my student days which rendered this work possible, and for his untiring interest in the translation, the revision of which he has superintended, besides contributing the introduction.

My thanks are also due to Professors Wesselhoeft and Rolfe, of the University of Pennsylvania, for kindly counsel and encouragement.

E. W.

THE HEART OF HAMLET'S MYSTERY

Introduction

By W. J. Rolfe

The Hamlet problem has been well called "the Sphinx of modern literature." Its deep mystery baffles us, but we return to it again and again in the vain hope of solving it. Some one has said that "a man ought, perhaps, to change his opinion concerning this drama once every decade during the first forty years of existence; it would, in most cases, be a good sign of increased culture and maturer intellect." While studying it for more than forty years I may have modified my own opinion in some measure oftener than that; but since I became acquainted with the Werder theory I have been more and more inclined to believe that it sub-

stantially plucks out the heart of the mystery.

Countless attempts have been made to solve the problem. Some of them are noteworthy only for their absurdity—like the theory that the Prince was a woman in disguise, or that the key to the character is to be found in the line, "He 's fat and scant of breath" [1]—but most of them follow Goethe and Coleridge in assuming that the difficulty of Hamlet's situation is due entirely to *subjective* causes, being in the man himself, not in what he has to do.

The influence of these early and eminent critics—the first of any note to attack the problem—is well stated by Professor Hiram Corson in his *Introduction to Shakespeare* (Boston, 1889). He says:

"I am disposed to think that Coleridge and

[1] The former theory was set forth by Mr. Edward P. Vining in *The Mystery of Hamlet* (Philadelphia, 1881); and the latter in the *Popular Science Monthly* (May, 1860) in an article entitled "The Impediment of Adipose —a Celebrated Case"—the case being that of Hamlet. The German critic Loening also (as quoted by Tolman) "thinks that the evidence points to an internal fatness, fatness of the heart; and he believes that this physical infirmity helps to explain the inactivity of the hero."

Goethe, by the substantially similar theories they advanced in regard to the man Hamlet, contributed more, especially Goethe (as he exercised a wider authority than Coleridge), toward shutting off a sound criticism of the play than any other critics or any other cause. Their *dicta* were generally accepted as quite final; and many a Shakespeare student now living, whatever his present views may be, can remember when he so accepted them, and had not a glimmer of suspicion that in the main they *might* be wide of the mark."

Goethe's famous criticism, which appeared in *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* in 1795, but which attracted no special attention in England until Carlyle's translation was published in 1824, need not be quoted in full here. The gist of it is contained in these few sentences:

"To me it is clear that Shakespeare sought to depict a great deed laid upon a soul unequal to the performance of it. In this view I find the piece composed throughout. Here is an oak-tree planted in a costly vase, which should have received into its bosom only lovely flowers; the roots spread out, the vase is shivered to pieces. A beautiful, pure, noble, and most moral nature, without the strength

of nerve which makes the hero, sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off; every duty is holy to him,—this too hard. The impossible is required of him,—not the impossible in itself, but the impossible to him."

Coleridge's view, as given in his *Lectures on Shakespeare* in the spring of 1808, agrees with that of Goethe in ascribing the inaction of Hamlet to purely subjective causes. He says:

"Man is distinguished from the brute animals in proportion as thought prevails over sense: but in the healthy processes of the mind, a balance is constantly maintained between the impressions from outward objects and the inward operations of the intellect:—for if there be an overbalance in the contemplative faculty, man thereby becomes the creature of mere meditation, and loses his natural power of action. . . . In Hamlet this balance is disturbed: his thoughts, and the images of his fancy, are far more vivid than his actual perceptions, and his very perceptions, instantly passing through the *medium* of his contemplations, acquire, as they pass, a form and a colour not naturally their own. Hence we see a great, an almost enormous, intellectual activity, and a proportionate

aversion to real action, consequent upon it, with all its symptoms and accompanying qualities. This character Shakespeare places in circumstances under which it is obliged to act on the spur of the moment:—Hamlet is brave and careless of death; but he vacillates from sensibility, and procrastinates from thought, and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve. . . . He mistakes the seeing his chains for the breaking of them, delays action till action is of no use, and dies the victim of mere circumstance and accident."

It was thought by some critics that Coleridge was indebted to A. W. Schlegel, whose *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, delivered at Vienna in 1808, were published in 1809; but Coleridge himself said afterwards:

"Mr. Hazlitt replied to an assertion of my plagiarism from Schlegel in these words: 'That is a lie; for I myself heard the very same character of Hamlet from Coleridge before he went to Germany, and when he had neither read, nor could read, a page of German!'"

This was corroborated by J. P. Collier, who, in his *Introduction to Hamlet* (1843), declares that he himself heard Coleridge "broach these

views before Schlegel's *Lectures* were published."

Schlegel says of the play:

"The whole is intended to show that a calculating consideration, which exhausts all the relations and possible consequences of a deed, must cripple the power of acting; as Hamlet himself expresses it:

'And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;
And enterprises of great pith and moment,
With this regard, their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action. . . .'

He acts the part of madness with unrivalled power, convincing the persons who are sent to examine into his supposed loss of reason merely by telling them unwelcome truths and rallying them with the most caustic wit. But in the resolutions which he so often embraces and always leaves unexecuted, his weakness is too apparent: he does himself only justice when he implies that there is no greater dissimilarity than between himself and Hercules. He is not solely impelled by necessity to artifice and dissimulation: he has a natural inclination for crooked ways; he is a hypocrite towards himself; his far-fetched scruples

are often mere pretexts to cover his want of determination: thoughts, as he says, on a different occasion, which have

——— 'but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward.'"

The earliest distinct statement of the opposite theory—and, to my thinking, the true one,—namely, that Hamlet's delay in carrying out the injunction of the Ghost is wholly due to *objective* causes, appears to have been first propounded by J. L. Klein, in the *Berliner Modenspiegel* in 1846. Portions of his article were first translated into English, so far as I am aware, by Furness in his edition of *Hamlet* (1877), to which I am indebted for the following extracts:

"The tragic root of this deepest of all tragedies is secret guilt. Over fratricide, with which history introduces its horrors, there rests here in this drama a heavier and more impenetrable veil than over the primeval crime. There the blood of a brother, murdered without any witness of the deed, visibly streaming, cries to Heaven for vengeance. Here the brother, in sleep, far from all witnesses or the possible knowledge of any one, is stolen

upon and murdered. . . . For this deed of blood there is no human eye, no human ear. The horror of the crime is its security; the horror of this murder is that it murders discovery. This globe of earth has rolled over it. The murdered man is the grave of the murder. 'O horrible, O horrible, most horrible!' Over the first fratricide the blood of the slain cries for vengeance. This murdered brother, dispatched without a trace, has no blood to cry 'woe!' over him, except his blood in the ideal sense, his son . . . . This Cain's deed is known to no one but the murderer, and to Him who witnesses the murderer's secret remorse. The son has no other certainty of the unwitnessed murder than the suspicion generated by his ardent filial love, the prophecy of his bleeding heart, 'O my prophetic soul!'—no other conviction but the inner psychological conviction of his acute mind; no other power of proving it but that which results from the strength of his strong, horror-struck understanding, highly and philosophically cultivated by reflection and education; no other testimony than the voice of his own soul inflamed and penetrated by his filial affection; no other light upon the black crime hidden in the bosom of the mur-

derer than the clear insight of his own soul. Vengeance is impossible, for its aim hovers in an ideal sphere. It falters, it shrinks back from itself, and it must do so, for it lacks the sure basis, the tangible hilt; it lacks what alone can justify it before God and the world, material proof. The act being unprovable has shattered the power to act. . . . The nature of the crime has, as it were, paralyzed vengeance, which grows not to execution because, in collision with the unprovable deed of blood, it is shattered to pieces, its wings are broken. The soundless, silent deed has blasted vengeance itself and struck it dumb. The vengeance of the son—O horrible!—must thus be the seal of the murder of the father. His power to act festers in contact with the secret ulcer of the crime, and the poison, which with sudden effect wrought upon the pure blood of the father, works on in the son, and corrodes the sinews of his resolution.

"But how then? Is the subjective, moral conviction which, for the popular sense, is reflected from without by the poet in the Ghost—is not this motive sufficient to give wings to the revenge of the son? Is not this inner conviction the catch-

word, 'the cue to passion,' which must spur him on to take public vengeance upon a crime which no one suspects but himself? No! if Hamlet is not to be pronounced by all the world to be what he feigns, stark mad. No! if he is not to appear to all Denmark, with all its dignitaries and nobles at its head, otherwise than a crazy homicide; not though he appeals ten times over to the 'Ghost' that appears to him; not unless he would appear to be that which he undertakes to punish, a parricide! No! if he would not appear in his own eyes a black-hearted John-a-dreams, as a visionary, a crazy ghost-seer; he the free-thinking knightly prince, with his powerful understanding. In the nature of the crime, I repeat, the solution of the riddle is to be sought. The assassination, for which there is no evidence to satisfy the popular mind, is the veil of the tragedy. The quality of the deed necessitates the apparent inaction of Hamlet and his subtle self-tormenting; they come not from cowardice, nor any native weakness of character, not from an idle fondness for reflection.

"It is the only one of all Shakespeare's tragedies in which the crime lies outside of or beyond

its sphere. In *Hamlet* Shakespeare has illustrated the great historical theorem by modes of proof different from those employed in his other tragedies: that punishment is only guilt developed, the necessary consequence of a guilt voluntarily incurred. As the genius possessing the profoundest insight into human history, it was incumbent on him to set the truth of this dogma above all doubt in a case in which no outward sign appeared against a deed of blood. The dogma that 'Foul deeds will rise though all the earth o'erwhelm them to men's eyes,' is proved here with fearful import. By this fundamental idea is *Hamlet* to be explained. This it is that renders the portraiture clear. The tragic action is here the hot conflict of the mind with an invisible fact. Hamlet's apparent action is a prodigious logic [*Dialektik*]. His supposed weakness has in reality the character of the heroic pathos of the antique tragedies, for here as there this weakness is a stormy struggle against the overwhelming pressure of an imposed expiation; the athleticism of a bitter agony every moment at its utmost tension; and this is the real action, the movement in the tragedy, but which our prating critics have not learned, who

are in criticism just such shovellers as the Grave-digger, and know nothing more of what action consists in than that it is action at work, action dispatching business. Argal, in Hamlet nothing else is personified than 'the fault of the theorising consciousness,' which is unable to act, even were it run through with a spit [*gespiesst*]."

In the introduction to my revised edition of *Hamlet* (1903) I remarked: "It is curious that no critic has noted the fact that the Klein-Werder theory of Hamlet's character was anticipated in an article on *Romeo and Juliet*, by George Fletcher, which appeared in the *Westminster Review* for September, 1845." It was reprinted in his *Studies of Shakespeare* (London, 1847), where I first noticed it while editing *Romeo and Juliet*. It was not quoted by Furness, and I had met with no reference to it elsewhere, but I have since found it mentioned by Corson (in his *Introduction to Shakespeare*), who, after stating that Werder's "main idea is found in Klein's article," adds that "George Fletcher has distinctly indicated it in a paragraph of his criticism on *Romeo and Juliet*."

He does not, however, quote the paragraph, which I will give here:

"Against Hamlet the evil practices of earth, the suggestions of hell, and the enmity of Fortune, are literally and truly combined to perplex and to crush him; but the just harmony of his mental constitution,

'Where every god did seem to set his seal,
To give the world assurance of a man,'

bears it out against 'the slings and arrows of outrageous Fortune,'—beaten and shattered indeed, and finally broken, but *unswerving* to the last. And yet, up to this very hour, cannot the critics of this Shakespearian masterpiece—including even Goethe, and Schlegel, and Coleridge—notwithstanding that its hero is 'benetted round with villanies,' and has a preternatural embarrassment of the most horrible kind superadded—find any adequate source of his calamities but in what they represent as the 'morbid' disproportion of his own character—his 'excess' of reflection and imagination—his 'deficiency' of passion and of will. We may ere long find occasion to show that Hamlet's consciousness of 'inauspicious stars,' so continually recurring throughout the piece, is as well grounded as that

of Romeo himself, and that under *their* influence *alone* does he sink,—that with sensibility and imagination, with passion and will, with sympathy and self-devotion, and with 'the hand to dare,' no less than 'the will to do,' Shakespeare has studiously endowed him,—each in an ideally exalted degree, and all harmoniously combined into a character of perfect ideal strength and beauty."

It is greatly to be regretted that Fletcher did not carry out the purpose here indicated of writing an article on *Hamlet*. However he might have developed the conception of the character and the situation here expressed, it is clear that he recognised the fact that the source of Hamlet's "preternatural embarrassment" was not subjective but objective—a fight against "outrageous Fortune" in which he had "the hand to dare" no less than "the will to do," whatever the issue of the conflict might be.

Werder, who assures us that he did not know of Klein's article at the time, delivered his lectures on *Hamlet* at the University in Berlin during the winter term of 1859–1860 and again

in that of 1871–1872. They were published in 1875, and a second edition appeared in 1893, the year of his death.

The Klein-Werder theory is fully accepted by Furness and by Corson, as by not a few of the recent commentators and critics. Hudson, who in the first edition of *Shakespeare's Life, Art, and Characters* (1872) had taken the ground that insanity was the real explanation of the character—that, "in plain terms, Hamlet is mad; . . . a derangement partial and occasional, paroxysms of wildness and fury alternating with intervals of serenity and composure," adopts the Klein-Werder theory in the revised edition of his book, published in 1882. After referring to the various changes his views of Hamlet had undergone in the course of thirty-eight years, he states that he became acquainted with Werder's discussion of the subject through Furness's edition of the play. He adds: "This essay seemed to me then, and seems to me still, altogether the justest and most adequate analytic interpretation of the character that criticism has yet produced. I read the

matter again and again, with intense avidity, and almost unalloyed satisfaction; feeling that there, for the first time, the real scope of the theme has been rightly seized and its contents properly discoursed."

Few attempts have been made, either in this country or in England, to refute this theory. Professor Alfred H. Tolman, in his *Views About Hamlet and Other Essays* (Boston, 1904), refers to it as "the most important theory of the drama that has been put forward in recent years." While he does not accept it he admits that one of its advantages is "that what most students regard as Hamlet's pretence of madness is at once adequately motived"; also that it "exalts and ennobles our conception of Hamlet's character." He adds: "All the familiar charges against him fall to the ground. The Prince whom we all love and pity now claims also our unqualified admiration. As good and wise as he is ill-fated, he stands forth almost without 'spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.' The drama becomes a tragedy of Fate, not a tragedy of character." Moreover, "the

situation and the progress of the action are intensely tragic"; and the critic feels this so deeply that he "has often wished that Shakespeare might have written this *Hamlet* also." But, after all, he decides that he "must renounce Werder and all his works."

And why? "Werder does not give the natural interpretation to the first commission of the Ghost, the demand for revenge. . . . To revenge does not naturally mean 'to bring to confession, to unmask, to convict.'" But, as Klein and Werder plainly show, anything short of this, in a case like this, would not be true revenge. As Werder says in a passage which our critic quotes in outlining the theory, "Killing the King *before* the proof is adduced would be, not killing the guilty, but killing the *proof;* it would be, not the murder of the criminal, but the murder of justice!" Verily, in Hamlet's own words, this would be "hire and salary, not revenge."

Again Professor Tolman says:

"In spite of an amount of soliloquy which is unexampled in dramatic literature, this theory is

obliged to assume that Hamlet fails to express the one purpose which fills his mind. After explaining what seems to him to be the real situation when Hamlet discovers the King at prayer, Werder says: 'Hamlet, it is true, does not himself say this,—no! But the state of the case says it instead.' This form of speech is significant of Werder's entire method. He is constantly explaining to us his own view of 'the state of the case'; he makes little effort to prove that Hamlet holds the same view."

But Werder here as elsewhere has made it perfectly clear what "the state of the case" is, and why and how it "says" what it would be superfluous for Hamlet to say; and our critic adds in the same paragraph: "It must be admitted, though, that the words of the hero when he comes upon the praying King are looked upon by very few persons as a truthful, or at least as a full, expression of his mind." In other words, they will not believe what Hamlet says when "the state of the case," as they see it, says something different to *them!*

On the next page Professor Tolman remarks:

"Dramatic soliliquy is largely a conventional

device for informing the audience concerning the state of mind of the speaker. . . . If we can explain away a mass of such utterances, and suppose that the solitary speaker is systematically untrue to his real thought, then the interpretation of dramatic soliloquy becomes not merely a fine art, but one so superfine as to be altogether beyond the reach of merely human powers."

Then he proceeds to declare that the results which Hamlet says he has in view in the play before the King—namely, to satisfy himself as to the Ghost's honesty, and to surprise the King into a public confession—are *not* what he really aims at. "Both are pretences: he has never really questioned the honesty of the Ghost, and he has little hope of any open confession from the King." That is, "the state of the case," from the writer's point of view, shows that Hamlet lies about his purpose in getting up the play. He does it, as we are told, because "he delights in torturing the King by means of the play; apart from that desire, the play is hardly more than a plausible excuse for doing nothing."

The only other point worthy of notice that our critic makes against Werder is thus stated: "There is a strong presumption against a theory which asks us to believe that Goethe and Coleridge misunderstood the play completely, and that they have been followed in their error by the great mass of the students of Shakespeare." He admits that "a disputed question cannot be settled by an appeal to authority"; but he adds that "Werder himself unwittingly recognises that a heavy burden of proof rests upon him when he says: 'That this point for a century long should never have been seen is the most incomprehensible thing that has ever happened in æsthetic criticism from the very beginning of its existence.'" I think the writer misapprehends Werder's meaning. As I understand it, he merely expresses his surprise that the critics have been so slow to discern what seems to him to be the simplest and most satisfactory solution of the Hamlet problem.

Goethe and Coleridge, as Corson suggests, had the advantage of being the first critics of note in the field. Their interpretations were

plausible, and were generally accepted, partly on that account and partly because of the reputation of their authors. But Goethe was a young man when he wrote his comments on the play and did not review them later; and Coleridge, as Corson remarks, gave "an admirable description of himself" in ascribing to Hamlet "an overbalance in the contemplative faculty" on account of which he "became the creature of mere meditation, and lost his natural power of action."

It was not so very long, however, before these views about Hamlet began to be questioned. Ziegler suggested doubts concerning some points in them in 1803 (before Coleridge wrote), Fletcher (independently of the Germans) recognised their falsity in 1845, Klein attacked them vigorously in 1846, Werder gave full expression to the new theory in 1859, and was followed by Schipper in 1862. Furness, preeminent among living exponents of Shakespeare, was the first to make it known in this country, if not in England, in 1877; and it has since rapidly gained in favour with Shakespearian

scholars and critics. Professor Tolman frankly admits this fact, but says: "The popularity of Werder's theory seems to me to be parallel to that of certain Confessions and Creeds. These have often been widely accepted because more logical and self-consistent than the very Scriptures which suggested them and which they sought to explain." If the "Scriptures" represent the text of the play, the old explanations are like the old creeds, which, though elaborately logical, and widely accepted for centuries because of the weight of authority in their favour, are now seen to be inconsistent with the truth they sought to explain, and are giving place to more enlightened and more rational interpretations of that truth. No doubt there are many who, like my good friend Tolman, have "often wished" that they might see their *Hamlet* in this new and better light; but let them not despair, for it may yet dawn upon them.

The only other noteworthy attempt to refute Werder's views that I have seen is in Profes-

sor A. C. Bradley's masterly study of *Hamlet* in his *Shakespearian Tragedy* (London, 1904). He objects to it, first, because "from beginning to end of the play, Hamlet never makes the slightest reference to any external difficulty"; and he asks: "For what conceivable reason should Shakespeare conceal from us so carefully the key to the problem?" That the difficulty is *not* external is the assumption of the critic. That it *is* external is clearly implied in Hamlet's assertion that he has "cause and will and strength and means to do it." The difficulty is not in himself, but in what he is required to do.

Secondly, Dr. Bradley says that Hamlet "always assumes that he *can* obey the Ghost," and that he "asserts" it in the passage just quoted. He "can" do it, but he *must not* do it until the external difficulties are removed.

Thirdly, "Why does Shakespeare exhibit Laertes quite easily raising the people against the King? Why but to show how much more easily Hamlet, whom the people loved, could

have done the same thing, if that was the plan he preferred?"—The petty revolt stirred up by Laertes was a minor incident in Shakespeare's plot, and had no other significance. It is absurd to suppose that Hamlet could have accomplished his task "much more easily" in any such way. He knew better than to attempt it.

Fourthly, "Hamlet did *not* plan the play-scene in the hope that the King would betray his guilt to the court. He planned it, according to his own account, in order to convince *himself* by the King's agitation that the Ghost had spoken the truth."—Hamlet takes it for granted that if the King betrays his "occulted guilt" in such a manner that he and Horatio can see it, others will see it. In the preceding soliloquy he has said:

"I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have *proclaim'd* their malefactions;
For murder, though it have no tongue, will *speak*
With most miraculous organ."

These criminals "proclaimed" their guilt to the audience; but Hamlet's experiment has been only partially successful. It satisfies him and his friend that the Ghost told the truth and that the King is guilty, but the rest of the audience appear not to have seen anything suspicious in his behaviour, or they may have supposed that it was due to some sudden illness.

Fifthly, "Hamlet never once talks, or shows a sign of thinking, of the plan to bring the King to public justice; he always talks of using his 'sword' or his 'arm.' And this is so just as much *after* he has returned to Denmark with the commission in his pocket as it was *before* this event. When he has told Horatio the story of the voyage, he does not say, 'Now I can convict him'; he says, 'Now am I not justified in using this arm?'"

Hamlet talks of using his "sword" or "arm" bcause the killing of the King is the end or aim of his task, which he keeps ever in view while forced to wait for the fit time to accomplish it —that is, until he can "bring the King to public justice." This time has not come when he

talks with Horatio, but since it is now clear that the King has plotted against his life in sending him to England, Hamlet feels that perhaps he may be justified in dispatching him. But Horatio, who has been his confidant, and who understands and approves his delay, sees that he must still refrain from striking the decisive blow. He cannot therefore reply, "Yes, you may now do it," but he reminds Hamlet that the King will soon get news from England and that he must be on his guard against fresh machinations of the enemy. Horatio does not mean, as our critic asserts elsewhere, to "decline to discuss that unreal question," nor to say: "Enough of this endless procrastination! What is wanted is not reasons for the deed, but the deed itself"; but rather: "Hard as it is to wait, you must still do it—but keep your eye on the King!"

These are all the points that Dr. Bradley attempts to make against Werder, and I treat them very briefly because I think that he, either directly or indirectly, answers them better. The English critic himself adds:

"It is of course quite probable that, when Hamlet was 'thinking too precisely on the event,' he was considering, among other things, the question how he could avenge his father without sacrificing his own life or freedom. And assuredly, also, he was anxious that his act of vengeance should not be misconstrued, and would never have been content to leave a 'wounded name' behind him. His dying words prove that."

I may add that Dr. Bradley's own explanation of Hamlet's inaction is that he was the victim of "melancholy, not dejection, nor yet insanity," though it is "very probable that he was not far from insanity." He adds:

"If the pathologist calls his state melancholia, and even proceeds to determine its species, I see nothing to object to in that; I am grateful to him for emphasising the fact that Hamlet's melancholy was no mere common depression of spirits; and I can easily believe that many readers of the play would understand it better if they read an account of melancholia in a work on mental diseases. If we like to use the word 'disease' loosely, Hamlet's condition may truly be called diseased. No exertion of will could have dispelled it. Even if

he had been able at once to do the bidding of the Ghost, he would doubtless have still remained for some time under the cloud."

This theory is not entirely new, but Dr. Bradley has developed and illustrated it with remarkable ability and ingenuity. No student of Shakespeare or of psychology can fail to find his discussion of it intensely interesting, though he may not be convinced that it plucks out the heart of Hamlet's mystery. To my thinking, there are fatal objections to it, as to all the purely *subjective* theories; and it does not seem to me to be even the most plausible of its class. It may, however, be considered the least objectionable of those which assume that Hamlet is in a greater or less degree mentally diseased.

All the theories, whether subjective or objective, have their difficulties. As Dr. Bradley remarks, "it may be held without any improbability that, from carelessness or because he was engaged on this play for several years, Shakespeare left inconsistencies in his exhibition of the character which must prevent us from being certain of his ultimate meaning."

Certainly there seem to be such inconsistencies—at least there are perplexities that baffle all the critics—like the question of Hamlet's age, for instance. The testimony of the Grave-digger in the last act makes him thirty. The man says that he has been a grave-maker thirty years, and that he " came to 't that day our last king Hamlet overcame Fortinbras," which he further says was " the very day that young Hamlet was born." Again, Yorick's skull has lain in the earth " three and twenty years," and Yorick used to bear the boy Hamlet on his back when, we may suppose, he was seven years old. This seems mathematically definite; but, on the other hand, we find accumulated evidence of a circumstantial character early in the play that Hamlet was a younger man. Perhaps we can lay no stress on the fact that he has just come from " school "—that is, from the university—and wishes to return; for critics tell us that thirty was no extraordinary age for a student in those days. That may be, but the tone and manner of the King and Queen in the second scene of the play indicate that they

are talking to a very young man. This is even more marked later when Polonius says to the Queen before Hamlet comes to her chamber (iii. 4):

"Look you lay home to him.
Tell him his pranks have been too broad to bear with,
And that your grace hath screen'd and stood between
Much heat and him. . . .
Pray you, be round with him."

Can this refer to a man of thirty? No more, I think, than the mother's threat soon afterwards: "Nay, then, I'll set those to you that can speak"; that is, "I'll report you to your uncle, who will make you obey." It is worthy of note that, in the speech just before this—"Why, how now, Hamlet?"—the quarto of 1603 has "How now, *boy?*" Horatio refers to him as "young Hamlet," and the Ghost calls him "noble youth" and alludes to his "young blood." Polonius says to Ophelia:

"For Lord Hamlet,
Believe so much in him that he is young;"

and her brother warns her to regard the Prince's love-making as "a violet in the youth of primy nature." The King addresses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as

> "being of so young days brought up with him,
> And sith so neighbour'd to his youth and haviour";

that is, young companions of this young fellow. His interest in fencing, which Claudius calls "a very riband in the cap of youth," points in the same direction. He is, moreover, of about the same age as Laertes, who is studying at Paris as Hamlet at Wittenberg, and the interview between Laertes and Polonius, as well as the old man's asking Reynaldo to look after his son in Paris, shows that Laertes cannot be much beyond twenty.

How then are we to account for the Gravedigger's reckoning? It can hardly be one of the accidental slips in arithmetic to which Shakespeare was prone; and the added reference to Yorick's age indicates that it was intended to be a definite statement of Hamlet's

age. Perhaps we may, with many critics, accept Dr. Furnivall's explanation:

"I look on it as certain that when Shakspere began the play he conceived of Hamlet as quite a young man. But, as the play grew, as greater weight of reflection, of insight into character, of knowledge of life, etc., were wanted, Shakspere necessarily and naturally made him a formed man; and, by the time he got to the Grave-digger's scene, told us the Prince was thirty—the right age for him then, but not his age when Laertes and Polonius warned Ophelia against his youthful fancy for her, etc. The two parts of the play *are* inconsistent on this main point in Hamlet's state."

Professor Minto argued that Hamlet was a boy of seventeen, but Dowden, Bradley, and the majority of editors and critics agree in regarding him as about twenty-five.

If Shakespeare had revised the play later in life—and particularly if he had done it with a view to publication—he would probably have removed these and other inconsistencies that have puzzled the critics.

But we must take the play as we find it, ex-

plaining its inconsistencies and solving the problems it involves as best we can. After a careful study of the various critical attempts to do this, the Klein-Werder theory seems to me decidedly the most natural and the most satisfactory. It is naturally suggested, I think, by the changes that Shakespeare made in the story on which it was founded and in the character of the hero.

He took the main incidents of his plot—either directly or through the earlier lost play on the subject—from the old mythical history of Denmark. The incidents in the early part of the play are adopted from this source with only slight modification. In the history Hamlet's father is murdered openly at a banquet by his brother, and no ghost is needed to expose the crime. The previous relations of the criminal with the queen are the same as in the play. He gains the throne and plots to destroy Hamlet, who, as he is aware, will attempt to revenge his father's death. This Hamlet accomplishes as soon as possible, after feigning insanity to disguise his purpose. He does not, however, lose

his own life, but justifies himself before the people, and is made king. His subsequent experiences have no connection with the play and need not be recounted here.

While Shakespeare thus accepts the general *situation* of the old history, he changes the spirit and tone of it completely. He transfers the scene from the sixth to the sixteenth century, and modifies the character of his hero accordingly. The original Hamlet was a man of his race and of his age. His notions as to the duty of revenge were those of the ancient Norsemen, as simple as they were savage. Claudius, in talking with Laertes, expresses them concisely: "Revenge should have no bounds." This earlier Hamlet sees his way at once and clearly. He kills his uncle as soon as an opportunity offers. As he cuts off the murderer's head, he says:

"This just and violent death is a just reward for such as thou art: now go thy ways, and when thou comest in hell, see thou forget not to tell thy brother (whom thou traitorously slewest) that it was his son who sent thee thither with the mes-

sage, to the intent that being comforted thereby, his soul may rest among the blessed spirits, and quit me of the obligation that bound me to pursue his vengeance upon my own blood [my own relative] —"

and in the next sentence the historian tells us that Hamlet, in what he had done, was "hardy, courageous, and worthy of eternal commendation." He goes on to cite the example of David, "a holy and just king, and of nature simple, courageous, and debonair," who, "when he died, charged his son Solomon not to suffer certain men that had done him injury to escape unpunished"—and he adds that "this holy king, as then ready to die and give account before God of all his actions," would not have done this "if God himself had not inspired that desire of vengeance within his heart." The pious old chronicler was certainly right in regarding this Norse theory of the sacred obligation of vengeance as identical with the ancient Hebrew belief and practice.

Now this original Hamlet is just the man that so many excellent critics would have

Shakespeare's Hamlet to be, but it is not the man that Shakespeare has made him. The Wittenberg student and philosopher is no Norse barbarian like his prototype in the history. He has that old Norse blood in his veins, and it prompted the impulse to "sweep to" his revenge when he first heard the revelation of his uncle's guilt; but as soon as he reflects upon the real nature of the task laid upon him by the injunction of the Ghost, it "gives him pause." "Revenge my murder! Kill the murderer!" seems at first thought to be the plain and simple meaning of the injunction. So most of the critics have understood it, and so, as I have said, Hamlet appears to have understood it when the fact of the murder was first mentioned but the details had not been given. After he has heard these, and the Ghost has gone with the parting admonition, "Remember me!" he begins to realise what the injunction involves. He cannot tell his friends what has occurred, nor permit them to tell others what they have seen and heard. Hence the oath of secrecy which he exacts from them, emphasised by the

hint he gives them as they leave him that the situation is most serious:

"The time is out of joint—O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right!"

Most significant words, though the critics have taken little note of them! They certainly suggest a profound sense on Hamlet's part that the problem he has to solve is a peculiarly complicated and perplexing one, involving far more than the killing of Claudius. That must indeed be done; but Hamlet sees now that he *cannot, must not* do it at once, even if a safe opportunity should occur—*cannot, must not* do it—not from lack of nerve or will to strike the blow, but because this would not be true revenge from a rational and philosophical point of view, nor from Shakespeare's point of view as a dramatic artist.

This is "the key to the problem," as Dr. Bradley calls it, and he wonders why Shakespeare "conceals it from us so carefully." I think Shakespeare would have wondered that anybody reading the play could fail to see that it is thrust before his eyes right here. The

situation proclaims it, the poet's conception of Hamlet's character necessitates it, the subsequent action develops and illustrates it. Werder's analysis of the play explains and demonstrates this view of it.

NOTE.—It is proper to state that, though I have assisted Miss Wilder in the final revision of her manuscript for the press, and also in reading the proofs of the book, I did not think it necessary to compare her careful translation with the German original.

I may add that while I believe, as I have said above, that Werder's theory "substantially plucks out the heart of Hamlet's mystery," I have my doubts whether he is entirely correct in his interpretation of sundry minor parts of the play which there was no reason for specifying either in the introduction or here.

W. J. R.

THE HEART OF HAMLET'S MYSTERY

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I

All the leading critics, with Goethe at the head, advance the idea that Hamlet is at fault on account of some subjective deficiency or weakness. If he had not been just the man he was, if he had been fitted by nature for the task imposed upon him, he would immediately have taken another and more direct course to accomplish it. He himself is the obstacle; he procrastinates from his own nature, and thus complicates the situation and drags everything out of place by giving it a direction wrong in itself and ruinous to himself and others.

For my own part, I must flatly dissent from this conclusion. Let me ask, first of all, would Hamlet have dared to act as these critics almost unanimously demand that he should have done? Can Hamlet, or can he not, so act? It is certainly a pertinent question. I maintain

that he could not have thus acted, and for purely objective reasons. The facts of the case, the force of all the circumstances, the very nature of his task, directly forbid it; so absolutely that Hamlet is compelled to respect the prohibition, even when his reason, his poetic and dramatic, yes, even his human judgment, would decide differently. The critics have been so absorbed in the study of his character that the task imposed upon him has been lost sight of. Here is the fundamental mistake.

What do the critics require of Hamlet? That he should attack the King immediately and make short work with him, indeed, the shortest possible. He is not to feign to be crazy; not to draw out his tablets, but rather his dagger; not to cry "Adieu, remember me," but "Death to the murderer!" He should go to the King at once and slay him. He can do this the first time he sees the King, if it be the very next hour; the opportunity is always at hand, nothing is easier than to take advantage of it. But what is to follow the dagger-stroke? Then, say the critics, he is to call the court and

people together, justify his deed to them, and take possession of the throne.

And how is Hamlet to begin to justify his deed? By telling what his father's ghost had confided to him, say the critics. But does not this imply a very strange idea of Hamlet's public, of the Danish nobility and people before whom he must defend himself? Is it possible that they will believe him? Would they be convinced of the justice of his deed by evidence of this sort? The critics have assumed that he was by birth the supreme judge in the country and the legitimate heir to the throne, whom a usurper had deprived of his rights. Is there any proof of these assertions? Certainly none in Shakespeare. Hamlet himself breathes no word of complaint of having suffered any such wrong. And if such a wrong had existed, if there had been a usurpation, Hamlet would certainly have spoken of it, or if he had been silent Horatio and others would certainly have referred to it. Might not the courtiers have hinted that his madness proceeded from this cause? At the very opening of the play, in the

first scene, when the possible political significance of the appearance of the Ghost was discussed, surely no fact bearing upon it would have been passed over![1] There is not the faintest hint in the play that any illegal action had been taken against the Prince; indeed the opposite state of affairs is clearly indicated.

How is Hamlet to justify his deed to the subjects of the murdered sovereign? He can do it only by citing the communication of an apparition that had charged the King with the murder of his brother. That is clearly too much to demand of Hamlet. It is degrading to the intelligence of the Danish people to suppose, for one instant, that they would have believed the story.

[1] Professor Werder at this point, misled by the German word *Erbin*, explains at some length that none of Hamlet's rights to the throne were usurped. He asserts that the Queen was the legitimate heiress and successor to the crown, and that the most Hamlet could hope for would have been his election as co-regent. If Professor Werder had looked into the matter, he would have found that Steevens, a hundred years earlier, had called attention to the fact that Denmark was an elective monarchy. Justice Blackstone also disposed of the idea that Claudius was a usurper.

It has been said that Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo could, by their testimony, have helped him in this matter. It is true that they had seen the Ghost—they could swear to that—but no one except Hamlet had heard one word of what the Ghost had said to him. All that they themselves heard was a voice from underground which admonished them to swear upon the sword, as Hamlet requested, never without his consent to talk about what had happened; so the hope of producing conviction with the people by this means is very doubtful. They will naturally say, "Hamlet, the only interested party, is defendant and judge at the same time, supreme judge of his own case."

It is an absolute impossibility if he kills the King that he could justify the deed solely upon his own testimony, and there certainly is no other. And would not the nobles, the court, the legislators of the kingdom, regard Hamlet as the most guilty, the most audacious, most shameless of liars and criminals, who, to gratify his own ambition assassinated the King, accusing his victim, without any proof whatsoever, of

murder in order to clear himself from the same crime? The people would hardly acknowledge as their king a notorious regicide who could devise such a plot for gaining possession of the throne. They would be roused to fury against him from the very fact that he thought them foolish enough to believe his story. He would appear to them base in murdering the King, and baser still for insulting his victim by a most shameful and wholly unproved accusation. The very least they could do would be to declare him insane and confine him in chains.

Hamlet understands his own position and cares for his own reputation very much better than the critics who have thus taken him to task. If he had killed the King immediately, what the critics call heroism would have served only to prove him a fool.

The Ghost himself has a better understanding of the case than the critics. He calls upon his son to avenge his murder, but he has by no means the passionate thirst for blood that the critics evince. He is in no such haste, and leaves time and place to his son. "*Howsoever*

thou pursuest this act" are his words. He does not intimate that a thrust of the dagger will suffice, or that his demands would thereby be satisfied. Even when he comes the second time he does not blame Hamlet for his delay, as the critics have done. Hamlet himself does that, but the Ghost says only:

> "Do not forget. This visitation
> Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose."

Moreover, the Ghost at that time does not appear as a threatening, angry form in armour, as the critics suppose, but in his home dress.

Kreyssig says: "Hamlet, according to our idea, should have dealt with the King without further proof, because we have learned in the very first act of the play that the King is a murderer. Hamlet therefore would be wholly in the right in killing him at once." As auditors in the theatre we do know this fact, but the Danes do not know it, and the mere fact of the ghostly communication would never satisfy them of the justice of the assassination. To the audience all the details are perfectly clear, but

to the actors in the play this is not the case. What would be truth and justice by the verdict of an audience would not appear so to the persons in the drama. Denmark is Hamlet's objective world. If Denmark condemns him, as it must, because it is impossible for him to justify himself before that world,—if in the eyes of that world he must appear as a cowardly and clumsy liar and villain, then his dramatic honour and reason, and his personal honour as a Danish prince, are lost for ever, even though Horatio should believe in him with ten times the fervour he shows.

That an impeachment of the King would be as injudicious as his instantaneous murder goes without saying. The result to Hamlet would be the same. But in that case the living King would conduct the trial, and would make the alleged evidence appear still more fabulous.

What is Hamlet to do? What is his actual task? A sharply defined duty, but a very different one from that which the critics have imposed upon him. It is not to crush the King at once—he could commit no greater blunder—

but to bring him to confession, to unmask and convict him. That is Hamlet's task, his first, nearest, inevitable duty. As things stand, truth and justice can come to light only from one mouth, that of the crowned criminal, and if he or some one connected with him does not speak, then the truth will be for ever hidden. That is the situation! Herein lie the terrors of this tragedy. This is the source of Hamlet's enigmatical horror and the bitterness of his misery. The secret of the encoffined and unprovable crime is the unfathomable source out of which flows its power to awaken fear and pity. This single humanly natural fact has never been perceived for more than a century.[1] And yet the fact is so convincing that when it has once been comprehended it must remain for ever clear.

Why did Hamlet delay if the task could be

[1] Professor Werder says: "Before my time two critics, Levinstein and Klein, especially the latter, have taken views similar to my own. Of these views, however, I knew nothing; they were brought to my notice only during the delivery of the third course of my lectures on Hamlet."

as easily accomplished as the critics insist? Alas! It is so difficult that it is almost impossible. Shakespeare himself lets us see that he understands it to be so. Claudius has no idea of confessing. Even if Hamlet should strike at him, there would be no disclosure of the truth. Goethe naturally never thought of such an assassination. To imagine that he did is an absurdity. His view of the play was largely that of a young man, expressed when directly under the influence of English criticism, and he did not see the horror and the difficulty of Hamlet's task. He did not modify his opinion afterwards because in later years he was very much occupied with other matters, and had neither inclination nor leisure to study Shakespeare carefully.

The main point of my declaration is by no means the doubtful results for Hamlet as an individual if he had been governed by the demands of the critics, but rather the effect such a course would have upon the fulfilment of his task. If Hamlet had struck down the King, without unmasking him, if he had obeyed the

Ghost's prayer for revenge at the earliest opportunity by a bold dagger-thrust, the direct result would have surely been that no one would have believed in the apparition; its intentions would have been frustrated, and the true punishment, which should be memorable through the ages, would be rendered impossible. For no punishment can be real and effective unless the offender be condemned by the unanimous verdict of his world.

The apparition did not appear for the purpose of dethroning the King and having Hamlet succeed to the crown. The paternal spirit asked Hamlet, as any father might ask a son, to revenge his murder and not allow the kingly bed in which his own child was born to be stained with infamy, not to allow injustice to triumph and villany to remain unpunished:

"If thou didst ever thy dear father love
Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder."

Then he relates the circumstances of the crime, and continues:

"If thou hast nature in thee, bear it out;
Let not the royal bed of Denmark be

A couch for luxury and damned incest.
But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,
To prick and sting her. Fare thee well at once!"

Not one word regarding the succession to the crown, not a syllable suggesting that Hamlet should thrust the King from the throne. Only the injured husband and father speaks from out the armoured figure.

If Hamlet had misunderstood the Ghost's meaning and had assassinated the King before he had unmasked him, he would really save rather than destroy him. He would make the King immortal, for the sympathy of the world would flow to him, and through all time the royal criminal would be regarded as the innocent victim of a wicked plot. Instead of being condemned he would be canonised. That his death should appear to be the result of divine justice would be impossible, for the insane act

would cause an impenetrable veil to fall between the light of truth and the eyes of the world. Hamlet, as the one to whom alone the truth can ever be known, would turn that truth to falsehood if he thus caused it to remain for ever unproved to the world. He would actually be a most efficient accomplice in the murder of his father, if he furnished no proof of the crime, but presented himself as the sole accuser and judge of the criminal. What Hamlet has most at heart after he sees the Ghost is *not* the death, but, on the contrary, the *life* of the King, henceforth as precious to him as his own. These two lives are the only means by which he can fulfil his task. Now that he knows the crime and is enjoined to punish it, nothing worse could happen to him than that the King should suddenly die unexposed and thus escape his deserts. Justice would then be defeated and truth be doomed to oblivion. Hamlet must hope that both of them will live until the time is ripe for the truth to be disclosed, and in this hope he must do what he can to protect and preserve his own life.

Suppose that Hamlet had killed the King and

thus deprived him of the fruits of the murder, or had lost his own life by the action; or suppose that the Danes could have been so insane as to place him upon the throne after he had murdered the King; would revenge in the true tragical sense be satisfied? To a tragical revenge punishment is necessary, but this punishment must be justified and vindicated before the world. Therefore Hamlet does not aim at the crown nor is it his first duty to kill the King; but his task is justly to punish the murderer of his father, unassailable as that murderer now appears in the eyes of the world, and to satisfy the Danes of the righteousness of his action. That is Hamlet's task.

II

Let us now examine the play and follow Hamlet as he acts, or does not act, after the appearance of the Ghost.

The basis of the play is an abyss of outrage which covers the darkest of secrets. A murder has been committed which has been reported as death by an unhappy accident, due to no human agency but to the bite of a serpent; the crime, by means of this clever artifice, is fully concealed; a tomb closes over it, the silence of death hides it forever. It can never be brought to light by an accuser, avenger, or judge. One brother has murdered another in this undiscoverable way, with the refinement of cruelty, by means of a deadly poison poured into his ear while asleep. The murdered man was not only the assassin's brother but also his sovereign; and the murderer has sought the widow of his victim in marriage. This woman had been the wife of the murdered King for

many years, and one son had been born to them who was now thirty years old. This woman is Hamlet's mother; this murderer of his father and seducer of his mother (though he is blameless in the eyes of the world) is Hamlet's uncle and stepfather; and he now wears the crown with the consent of the entire kingdom, and so is Hamlet's king.

This is a statement of the position in which the only son of this woman and the murdered man is placed. It is impossible to conceive of a situation more distressing.

It is true that at first Hamlet knew nothing about the murder but nevertheless his condition is utterly comfortless. He has just lost his father by death; a father for whom he cherished the utmost filial love and reverence. Moreover, he has lost his mother, although she lives; for, by her own will, by her own sinful act, she has espoused the brother of her former husband a month after the death of her honoured mate—"a little month, or ere those shoes were old with which she followed" to the grave the corpse of the man who had loved her so devotedly

" That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly,"

and upon whom she herself had hung

" As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on."

Hamlet felt in his soul that he had lost her. By that one act by which she outraged his most sacred sensibilities, she broke his heart.

Such a mother could never have been a blessing to him even if she had never caused him such suffering. Probably a sure instinct had drawn him towards his father, who appealed to all that was highest and deepest in his nature. He was now left wholly alone. As long as his father lived he loved and cherished his mother as his father did, but now that she had married his uncle, a man so inferior to his father, he felt that she could never have truly loved that father; and that even while she wept with seeming grief over the new-made grave, she was preparing to give her son this terrible surprise. Hamlet in his heart must now part with her. Losing his father was almost like losing his own life, but his mother had given him more and

worse to endure. Truly he can now cry out in grief,

"Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven
Or ever I had seen that day! . . .
Let me not think on 't—Frailty, thy name is woman! . . .
O God! a beast, that wants discourse of reason,
Would have mourn'd longer!"

He must hate and scorn her—yes, hate, because the woman who had acted so disgracefully is *his* mother! She has not only injured his filial feeling but has wounded him in the tenderest point of personal honour. He must feel degraded as long as he lives, must always be ashamed to know he is the son of such a mother, to think after they have lived together all these years that she could be guilty of so scandalous an act! With Hamlet's grievous bitterness is mingled the degrading sense of all natural delicacy so deeply insulted and violated. The woman has shamelessly thrown away her own life.

Both Hamlet and the Ghost show the feeling of mortification for the mother. The Ghost, however, speaks more in sorrow than in anger.

"Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts,—
O wicked wit, and gifts, that have the power
So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen.
O Hamlet, what a falling off was there!
From me, whose love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with the vow
I made to her in marriage; and to decline
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
To those of mine!"

What especially moves the Ghost is the criminal disruption of the family. He does not concern himself about the state or the government, makes no reference to the crown, and utters no hint of Hamlet's call to duty in regard to any of these things.

And for Hamlet! Need I tell what he feels in regard to his mother? Need I attempt to depict the depth of his grief, his unspeakably wounded feeling? Can anything be written that could add to what Shakespeare himself has given us, before whose vivid colouring every other attempt at portrayal must pale!

In the third act, in the only scene in which the son, although he has long known of his mother's sin, speaks to her about it, his expression of the feeling to which I refer is the more intense from the fact that it has been so long repressed.

In comparing the pictures of his father and uncle he says:

"Have you eyes?
Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,
And batten on this moor? Ha! have you eyes?
You cannot call it love, for at your age
The hey-day in the blood is tame, it 's humble,
And waits upon the judgment; and what judgment
Would step from this to this? . . .
O shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,
If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax,
And melt in her own fire."

And then the parting words:

"Good-night; but go not to mine uncle's bed. . . .
Refrain to-night,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence; the next more easy. . . .
Once more, good-night."

When the Queen asks, "What shall I do?" Hamlet answers with bitter irony:

"Not this, by no means, that I bid you do.
Let the bloat king tempt you again to bed,
Pinch wanton on your cheek, call you his mouse;
And let him, for a pair of reechy kisses,
Or paddling in your neck with his damn'd fingers,
Make you to ravel all this matter out."

That is Hamlet's feeling! Here we see what weighs upon his very soul, the shame of his misery and the horror of it.

These words, in spite of the frenzy with which he utters them, are not spoken rantingly; when he seeks to move his mother, as he does in this interview, he would adopt a tone far removed from rant, but much more terrible, more cutting, more effective. He allows his wrath, his horror, his loathing, to flow in fullest expression in his accusations; but the shame he feels would naturally cause him to moderate his tone; for Hamlet does not forget that it is a son who speaks these frightfully plain words to his mother.

Her sensual passion is the black spot of her

inner life. This is the source of the evil that she has brought upon the royal house. The Ghost laments it:

> "Virtue, as it never will be mov'd,
> Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,
> So lust, though to a radiant angel link'd,
> Will sate itself in a celestial bed,
> And prey on garbage."

Thrice does the Ghost repeat this charge against her, and this is the one theme of Hamlet's address to her. The burden of his arraignment of her is the withering power of this unholy lust. He would fain kill it in her. The painful conviction which has been forced upon him by his mother's conduct shows itself also in his talk with Ophelia; indeed, that fact is really the basis of it. It is, as it were, a prelude to his pleading with his mother. The feeling of shame that so disturbs and humiliates him is greatly increased by the indecent haste she has shown in her second marriage; and further by the thought that society, as represented by the court in the play, does not see it from the right point of view, that nothing out-

rageous is found in it, that full approval has been given to it. For let us not forget this reproach is not subjective, nor does it arise from any jealousy either of the Ghost or of Hamlet; it is wholly objective, showing the degeneracy of society that offers a ready compliancy to every manifestation of royal will. The poet has considered all the facts, and views the outrage upon the sacredness of marriage as the kernel of which events form only the shell. There is no hint that any political motive urged the mother to form the new alliance. No! Hamlet himself from the beginning feels only too sure than an inward personal prompting alone impelled her to this step.

We see, indeed, that Hamlet had this feeling before the interview with the Ghost. It is this idea which seems to him so incomprehensible and horrible and which pierces his very soul, which makes his mourning so heavy and from which comes his greatest bitterness. The haste of the marriage impresses him indescribably as a disgraceful and terrible proof of his mother's weakness. From the time of his birth no such

scandal had ever come to his knowledge. He had stood all his life between the royal pair sharing the glory of their power. Now he is dragged from the side of his mother by a man from whom he feels estranged in mind and heart; by a man who is the very opposite of his own father, and whom he has ever regarded with antipathy. This man now stands between himself and his mother, by her will, as his step-father, and he is degraded to the position of an alien, alone and hopeless, one who has lost all he once possessed by death and by the deliberate act of his mother. What death had left him, she took from him, indeed has taken more than death deprived him of,—she who gave him birth!

And yet she is still his mother; and he loves her with the old-time love but little diminished, as his sigh reveals,—"O that this too, too solid flesh would melt!" and his emotion in speaking to her shows that his affection has changed but slightly. Hamlet and the ghost of his father continue to regard her with deep affection. Can he banish the natural tenderness for his mother

from his heart and cast her from him? He has loved her for thirty years, and she has ever been tender to him, always so gentle and unselfish that before Hamlet knew otherwise he yearned to believe that her second marriage was only the result of deplorable weakness and lack of self-control.

What must have been the shock to his feelings when the truth first became clear to him, when he had reasonable proof of her criminal conduct! And yet with this knowledge he cannot cast her off. We all know how wonderfully Shakespeare has shown this complex feeling. In the scene we have been considering the mother asks:

"What have I done that thou darest wag thy tongue
In noise so rude against me?"

Hamlet answers:

"Such an act
That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent love
And sets a blister there, makes marriage-vows
As false as dicers' oaths; O, such a deed

As from the body of contraction plucks
The very soul, and sweet religion makes
A rhapsody of words! Heaven's face doth glow,
Yea, this solidity and compound mass,
With tristful visage, as against the doom,
Is thought-sick at the act."

After the Ghost has appeared and she assumes that Hamlet is mad, he appeals to her imploringly:

"Mother, for love of grace,
Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass but my madness speaks;
It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
Whilst rank corruption, mining all within,
Infects unseen. Confess yourself to heaven;
Repent what 's past, avoid what is to come;
And do not spread the compost on the weeds,
To make them ranker. Forgive me this my virtue;
For in the fatness of these pursy times
Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg,
Yea, curb and woo for leave to do him good."

When Hamlet says; "Forgive me this my virtue" (which some critics have regarded as boastful) he means not his own virtue but rather

the virtue which he admonishes his mother to have; and he naturally means the same when he continues:

"Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg."

The mother understands him and responds:

"O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain."

And he takes up the word:

"O, throw away the worser part of it,
And live the purer with the other half. . . .
And when you are desirous to be blest,
I'll blessing beg of you. . . .
I must be cruel only to be kind."

Let us return once more to the burden Hamlet bears at the beginning of the play. The death of his father, the idea he had until this time of his mother, and his relations with his kingly stepfather—these threefold terrible facts, crowding upon his outer and inner being, have changed happiness into deepest wretchedness. It is indeed a heavy weight for his sensitive soul, and how much the more remote circumstances and surroundings add to it!

Crossed in his hopes, dragged from his place

near his mother, the Prince sees himself reduced from his princely condition to that of a mere courtier; and under the burden of his misery, this Prince, who has studied at the University of Wittenberg, must play this degraded rôle, and in a court which is a centre of sin and hypocrisy. Even if Hamlet were in the best possible condition personally, this life must be disgusting to him.

We hear from warlike Denmark of the hero-king, Hamlet's father, who during a long reign had been so victorious and feared by all outside the realm. He had conquered the Norwegians and the Polacks, and England pays him tribute, but now the representative of this realm accomplishes his purposes by means of ambassadors and diplomacy! He indulges in preparations for war, but not from any soldierly ambition; rather from fear of defeat and desire for peace. Young Fortinbras knew well that now was the time to make a move against Denmark and bestirred himself accordingly.

About the process of this change—how things came to be "out of joint," or indeed

anything of the earlier career of the present king—we have no knowledge. Naturally the question arises how such a change could possibly have occurred. Did the elder Hamlet alone uphold the heroic standard, so that it disappeared wholly at his death? Where are the generals, the counsellors of the former king, the men who executed his commands? Was the elder Hamlet the sole leader who rallied his people and led them to battle? Was the present court his court? How long had Hamlet been absent from home?

Or did the hero-king, during the last years of his life, when all nations respected him, no longer seek military honours? Did all his great warriors die before he did? Did the baser elements, which are always ready to develop themselves, come to the fore during this period of tranquillity? Did the younger brother show himself chief leader in his new state of affairs, winning the people to his side, as he won the Queen herself, until he was certain that by making one master-stroke he could surely obtain the crown?

To all these and many other questions that naturally present themselves Shakespeare gives us no answer. All that he does is to place us in the midst of the abominable, detestable, ignominious ruin and degradation of the changed conditions, and he makes us see that this state of things is the reverse of that in the past, when Prince Hamlet had been happy.

In reality, the play has nothing to do with past time, or with the manner and character of the change. The main point—the crime and its nature—belongs to the immediate action; therefore any questions outside of this are idle. At the same time, there are two points which blend and form a focus, and Shakespeare shows us plainly that these two great facts should be made clear, or our interest in the whole situation will be lessened. One of these vital points is the crime.

When a person has conceived and carried out an iniquity of this kind to a direct end, as we know the King has done, it certainly gives us an unfavourable idea of the past life and character of the person who has plotted to that end.

Besides, a kingdom and society may appear sound and healthy, although really divided and inwardly cankered and weakened, so long as the sovereign holds it together with his own glorious personality. With the decline of this single will-power, the inward tendencies break out,—at first in the display of vain frivolity, which allows license,—after which the climax follows quickly.

In this condition of affairs, although the Prince wishes to return to Wittenberg, he dares not go; the wish of the King who opposes his departure is virtually a command. Why does the King hold him back? How strong he must be in his position, how secure he must feel himself! In the present state of affairs, the Prince, whose former life is blotted out, as it were, must henceforth lead a mere seeming existence, nay, rather, a mock existence, in this society to which his uncle gives tone, and which in every way is a continual jar to his feelings, annoying as much as it shocks him, and yet from which he dares not withdraw; a society which rebukes him for his sorrow with hypocritical friendliness.

All that remains for him is silence, nothing but silence!

This condition which he has to regard as the prospect of his future life causes him serious reflection, and the exclamation—

> "O that this too, too solid flesh would melt,
> Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!"

cannot fail to excite our sympathy as the fullest expression of the bitterness of his situation. The entire soliloquy is in the same vein.

The critics, however, in dealing with this first soliloquy of Hamlet, begin to err in interpreting what he says as evidence against his character and all his subsequent actions and motives. Garve writes: "Hamlet's mind is certainly weakened through grief and wrath, and an uncontrollable melancholy has settled upon him. In his first soliloquy the thought of suicide which possesses him is ample proof of this. Only an unsettled reason makes a man hate himself, the world, and life."

This criticism entirely ignores the real state

of affairs and Hamlet's real feeling. It is altogether too narrow to express the tone of Hamlet's thoughts, too sweeping in its deductions, and the position is too illogically taken.

Herr Hebler writes: "The tone of Hamlet's nature is clearly shown in this soliloquy in which he expresses his pain and indignation, not only about the recent marriage, but also about the evil tendencies of the world, but with no thought of any endeavour to raise his voice against them. Hamlet feels the horrible degradation, but he tarries too long in this state of passive emotion. He fails to display the happy mingling of 'blood and judgment' which he praises in Horatio."

Hamlet certainly praises frankly this union in Horatio, but not for the reason the critic assigns; namely, "because he was in such great need of it himself." From the beginning to the end of the speech there is no trace of this false motive, and the lack of such a union of blood and judgment in Hamlet is wholly a supposition of the critic. If Hamlet were thus

lacking, the sum-total of the motive would come out of it, a total of which Shakespeare never thought.

Yet the critic declares that "Hamlet tarries too long in this state of passive emotion." Too long? In what way? In relation to what consequence or what action? That must first be considered. For this brief moment he does not "tarry too long." We have just become acquainted with him; as he stands before us we do not ask whether his feelings have been the same during the entire month or not. We must take Hamlet's mind as we find it at this moment. Even while we are learning something about him that the soliloquy discloses to us, that moment is already past. If the action ended here we *might* consider whether Hamlet *did* "tarry too long in this state," or if these reflections had just occurred to him. But he has scarcely given vent in these few lines to these feelings when his friends arrive; he hears of the apparition and his thoughts and emotions are turned in another direction. Who thinks now of the soliloquy? In view of the immediate con-

sequences it disappears. The soliloquy is the heartfelt ejaculation of Hamlet's necessity; the bitterness and wretchedness of his destiny overburden him for the moment. What occurs later does not concern us; in fact, the future, at this point, does not exist for us. What does the soliloquy say?

"O that this too, too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! O God!
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on 't! O fie! 't is an unweeded garden
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this!
But two months dead! nay, not so much, not two!
So excellent a king; that was, to this,
Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth!
Must I remember? why, she would hang on him

As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on; and yet, within a month—
Let me not think on 't—Frailty, thy name is woman!—
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she follow'd my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears,—why she, even she—
O God! a beast, that wants discourse of reason,
Would have mourn 'd longer—married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules. Within a month?
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
She married. O most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not, nor it cannot come to good;—
But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue."

What Hamlet says here is the simple, natural, healthy expression of the situation. The reality, not something imaginary, weighs upon him; he feels the burden at this moment in just this way, and out of this feeling he expresses his opinion, for that, in truth, is its real import.

Does it need even one word to destroy the last

vestige of the usual explanation? To show that his first feeling and his first utterance were about his own burden? The secret torment within himself is the key to the understanding of this soliloquy; what Hamlet—I cannot say has a presentiment of—but, nevertheless, what is *in* him, dark, voiceless, but *always there*, wholly undefined but not to be banished and *bourne in upon his spirit*. He can form no idea of it, but he *feels* it! The atmosphere of murder which he inhales, which breathes upon him from the person of the murderer; the shuddering sense of the Ghost hovering near, all that awaits him at the very door, all that his friends have brought to his knowledge; all the Ghost has upon his lips to say to him; the terror, frightful as Past and as Future—all that is for him here and is his—all that is *in him!* That is the burden which oppresses him, the immovable weight which he does not yet understand but which he feels. Hence the tone and the colouring of the soliloquy, the feverish impatience in impotence.

Inwardly he rages; something will, something

must come! And one point more! the thing is terrible!—

"It is not, nor it cannot come to good;—
But break my heart for I must hold my tongue."

The spirit of this soliloquy is the secret torture wholly inexplicable even to himself. "The rest is silence."

How clearly the poet shows us in this soliloquy that Hamlet is indisputably and humanly healthy! Shakespeare is also normal in his conception of time and place, in connection with the drama as a whole.

What Hamlet at first only dimly feels, what he lets us forebode in the first scene, is that an unholy secret awaits us, preparing us thoroughly for the train of thought in this soliloquy. We can and we ought to understand the truth in it—the objective truth that Hamlet himself does not yet understand, but which exists in him as a torture. The poet has not left us in doubt. He brings the substance of the first scene before us again in the soliloquy; this time as inner action, for that very reason more veiled for the moment, seemingly

fighting against the darkness, but only inwardly. What the poet lets us *see* in the appearance of the ghostly parent and in the amazement of the soldiers, he lets us *hear*, at this point, in the tortured, lonely unrest of the son, who appears as despairing because he cannot understand the object and the reason of the torture; the son whose innocent inheritance is abomination and wickedness. Now comes the message, and facts and feelings, stirring one another, kindle a clear-burning suspicion. From this point Hamlet is the hero of the play; the call has come, he has the threads of fate in his hand.

While Hamlet is in the frame of mind expressed in the soliloquy, he learns that his father's ghost has appeared in armour, and instantly what has until now been slumbering within him awakes for the first time; it seems to spring up within him as a clear, distinct suspicion of a hidden crime—clear and distinct in form, because it had already existed as formless material in his inner consciousness. That which had moved him dimly as a merely passive, silent

feeling now reveals itself, speaks openly, takes the offensive, rises higher and breaks into words:

"All is not well,
I doubt some foul play."

His feeling becomes prophetic. Like sharp lightning in the night, it strikes him with its sudden illumination and he cries, as the light enters his soul:

"Foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes."

Soon he hears from his father's mouth the terrible secret; his presentiment was true; with one stroke all is clear to him; he sees the entire relation of the different events. But the light is the light of hell that throws into the darkness of his sorrow a burning glare.

III

I HAVE now reached the moment when Hamlet learns from the mouth of his father the terrible secret, and also that his own feelings had prophesied correctly.

What is Hamlet's first thought concerning the traitor and murderer? The mother comes first in the vent of his indignation and rage. "O most pernicious woman!" That is just, for the greater crime of the murder came as a direct consequence of her weakness; nay, further, the very fact that she had put herself in the power of the murderer suggested to him the selfish aim of the crime and really was the motive prompting it. In truth the crime against father and son was based upon her weakness, and therefore the manner of her "taking-off" later in the play is artistically just.

The command of the Ghost is, however, that

the son is to "contrive" nothing against the mother, nothing that "taints his mind"; he is to

"leave her to heaven
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her."

In the actual murder she had no part, and has always been entirely ignorant of it. The traitor has hidden it from her. He was and is, therefore, the guilty one and also the destroyer of the woman.

Hamlet continues:

"O villain, villain, smiling damned villain!"

and then:

"My tables—meet it is I set it down
That one may smile and smile and be a villain."

Prof. Hebler writes: "The hero contents himself for the time being with inscribing the remarkable fact in his note-book, for what one possesses in black and white he can refer to. He has learned that in Wittenberg."

I must ask if Prof. Hebler believes it proper to offer such an explanation and attribute it to

Hamlet? And again, can he pretend that these ideas have their birth and form in the poetical text and that they are really of an objective nature? Above all, that they are the ideas of the poet himself?

Later Prof. Hebler writes: "One finds himself asking if the poet did not allow this opinion of his hero to be expressed too clearly and too early, so that one is inclined to censure his villain with or without reason?"

These words, on the contrary, are a notification of the poet, but with a view to the fundamental point of his work as I understand it, *not concerning the character* but *the situation* of his hero. Instead of telling us what Hamlet *can* do first, he *lets* him do what he first can, namely, bring out and expose to view the character of the King on paper. This is a symbolic act, by which the poet shows us *how* to understand Hamlet; the pantomime which acquaints us with the *silence* that Hamlet's task demands. These words jotted down are the expression of that which is, at the outset, possible and impossible to Hamlet; and not only subjectively

but objectively, not only to Hamlet himself but what is of itself possible and impossible, under existing conditions. At first, Hamlet can only take passing note of the King, only point him out to himself—

"So, uncle, there you are"—

beyond this Hamlet can do absolutely nothing. Upon the one side is a well defended fortress, and on the other a single man, who is to take it, he alone. So stands Hamlet confronting his task.

Indeed the King is a formidable antagonist for Hamlet, not on account of what he does or can do, but of what he has done; and above all, the manner in which he has done it, the way by which he has acquired his strong position; and the King is a man who after having once secured a position will maintain it.

To Hamlet who utters these words they present another aspect, but for him too they have the thought of action not in a reflective manner but rather with the suddenness of undeveloped purpose. It is a characteristic of Shakespeare

that if he merely indicates or intimates something this hint is a psychological truth in the character he depicts. Hamlet is more distracted, according to my idea, by the communication of the Ghost, than at any other moment in the play; nevertheless there is no proof of failure to act promptly.

Let us hear the speech:

"O all you host of heaven! O earth! what else?
And shall I couple hell? O, fie! Hold, hold, my heart;
And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,
But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee!
Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee!
Yea, from the table of my memory
I 'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there;
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix'd with baser matter: yes, by heaven!
O most pernicious woman!
O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!
My tables,—meet it is I set it down,

That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;
At least I 'm sure it may be so in Denmark.—
So, uncle, there you are."

Is that raving? There is passion in the words, but no raving.

Hamlet's instantaneous but assured feelings are expressed in these words and also by this action. His impotence, his pain, and his agony drive him to his opinion of the King and to this condemnation of him. This symbolical action, springing from the passionate feeling within him, is impulsively performed. It is an outward protest, which, even if slight, even if useless, even if ineffective, is nevertheless a demonstration of his inward feeling. Does any one believe for one moment, that Hamlet *literally* writes down these words? He takes out the tables, jabs the point of his pencil into the leaf, just because he cannot pierce the King with his dagger as he would like to do. There is nothing more than this, only such a mark, which means, "There you are, uncle." Hamlet *says* indeed "Meet it is I set it down," but it does not mean that he actually writes it; that is not consistent

with his mood nor with the situation. Furthermore, this outward action of Hamlet's springs directly out of the innermost depths of creative genius.

We have now reached the point with which critics have been most interested,—the resolution of Hamlet "to put an antic disposition on." As far back as the time of Johnson it had been a disputed problem. Johnson says:

"He would by such an extraordinary condition draw the eyes of the King and Queen continually upon him, and on account of their evil consciences frighten them with terrible forebodings. Besides, the Prince would give them the best pretext possible to destroy his calculations, as they would have full power, on account of his madness, to shut him up, or, as really happened, send him out of the country."

This decision is again supposed to favour the idea that Hamlet is really insane, which idea, according to the critics, his lack of resolution naturally confirms. But the question arises, can pretended lunacy and real distraction of mind exist in one and the same man? Garve denies

it and declares it to be "a deviation from nature and truth." Another critic remarks: "The fact is, it amounts to the condition of lunacy, and therefore Hamlet has all the strength and all the weakness of genius which strengthens his contemplative nature and palsies his activity." Herr Flathe says: "Hamlet turns the assumed lunacy only upon old Polonius, and this shows great art in the poet. When Hamlet makes use of his assumed lunacy, he talks in a strange manner, it is true, but not at all witlessly, but rather, on the contrary, more reasonably. Polonius notices this fact." To other critics this resolution is a proof of Hamlet's weakness; it is regarded as a subterfuge that he adopts in his lack of energy, upon which he squanders his time uselessly.

Finally, according to von Friesen, this resolution should be considered as showing the manner in which Hamlet naturally becomes tragic. "The supposition," writes von Friesen, "that he is truly insane would make of him a wholly untragical character. Herein especially lies the enigma that we try in vain to solve." I

must acknowledge that I have no sympathy whatever with these ideas, nor with Schlegel when he says: "The fate of mankind stands there like a gigantic Sphinx, who threatens to cast every one who cannot guess her fearful riddle into the abyss of doubt." Hebler comes nearer the truth when he says:

"The love of truth in the Prince must make it impossible for him to show respect where he has none. He is certainly in a false position with respect to his uncle and his mother, because after the discovery of their treachery, he could not show the former submissiveness or even courtesy, and, as a sane person, not betray to them some suspicion of his mental state. He comes to the resolution as follows: after the disappearance of the Ghost he is at first truly somewhat 'out of joint' and calls his head, not wholly without reason, a 'distracted globe.' He plays the fool with marked naturalness to his friends, perceiving instantly that it will be advisable to protect the secret against their curiosity. 'What behaviour,' he asks himself, 'shall I, with this secret in my head, assume at first before my relatives, that is, until the hour of revenge?' It is very natural that

afterwards he should make use of his lunacy to set other people's heads right, and his mask serves to make others tear theirs from their faces."

Yes, indeed, the motive that Hebler suggests here is correct but it is only incidental. The root and substance of the action are of another nature. As soon as Hamlet has heard what the Ghost tells him, his clear head instantly comprehends the whole dire pass to which *Truth* and *Right* have come, beyond all human power. The imminent agony, aye, the shudder of certainty that must seize him as to the impossibility, as things stand, of solving the problem; the horror and the crime coming so close to him; his murdered father's cry for revenge; the triumphant murderer, who, if the task can be achieved, is certainly not to be reached by force and hardly by cunning—with scarcely a glimmering hope of success, he is so sagacious and artful;—all this forms a condition of things so dark and dread, a dilemma of so terrible and monstrous a nature, that for a man involved in it to break through it alone, by his own unaided strength, is indeed a task which

may well cost him the loss of his understanding.

In truth, if the situation is duly weighed, has there ever been another such task which was wholly placed within the power of a single person or any exertion or sacrifice that he personally can employ? Shakespeare has considered the task and therefore gives his hero this feeling and sense of the situation, although some may consider him a weakling and a shuffler, who tries to deceive himself and us in order to conceal his own want of energy. This, too, is thoroughly positive and not negative, not a blamable personal defect, but the monstrous, real objective trouble and dilemma; this natural immediate feeling is the *inmost* impulse to his purpose of "putting an antic disposition on." This instinctive motive is the first original motive. Hamlet's action is the direct outcome of his full sense of the situation.

Thus upon a sane mind is laid what is enough to destroy it, and in fact it does destroy *all* except the mind and the will and freedom of the mind. Because he knows that all in him of happiness and peace is already destroyed by

the situation in which, with perfect innocence on his own part, he is placed—for even were he to fulfil his task, how shall he ever again be happy?—and because he knows, at the same time, that the demon of his task is ceaselessly menacing the last thing which is left to him unshattered—his mind; because this intense suffering has come upon him, and because it wholly possesses him, therefore he can do nothing else but give expression to this his condition; and this, too, out of the inmost core of his nature and out of the strength and fineness of his understanding. That from which he actually suffers, the truth of his position, he manifests; he moves in the element which his fate has made for him, and on *which alone* all that he may undertake henceforth hinges. All students see and feel Hamlet's blighted being and his clear head, but they do not understand it. The simple fact of his outward appearance alone strikes them; they do not grasp his inner being, the suffering of the shattered spirit, the agony and conflict of the free, strong mind.—And this is the second point to be noted: that instinctive

impulse at once gives him some advantage and becomes effective as a purpose.

The behaviour for which, as something that may chance to be serviceable to him, he prepares his friends, and the connection of which with the appearance of the Ghost they were not to tattle about, is in fact of the greatest possible service to him. But they must never imagine that its true purpose concerns the downfall of the King, or they would understand the motive that prompts it; furthermore, this behaviour enables him at least to give vent to what is raging within him and what he would fain shriek out, while at the same time it diverts attention from the true cause of his trouble, from his secret, and thus assures its safety. To behave in his natural manner in the society that surrounds him after the change wrought in him by the communication made by the Ghost, putting wholly aside the question whether he could have done so or not—that would be of no service and a very bad rôle. Besides, by the behaviour he adopts he has no longer any need to show respect for those whom he

despises. Possibly also, if he is supposed to be crazy, he can, under this cover, should any favourable opportunity occur, make use of it for more active operations against the enemy than would be permitted to a sane man; play a more active game, be perhaps foolhardy, and, in case of failure, still have opportunity, under the protection of his supposed imbecility, for a new attack.

This also may occur to him when he finds himself suddenly caught in the clutch of his terrible fate—*may* occur! But it is not such an inducement as is certainly included in his thoughts. No matter of detail can he consider at first—that would require a plan, and Hamlet neither has *nor can he have one.*

He does what he must, takes the step which is directly before him, does what is actually at hand, does it without any other reflection, does what he in his situation must feel *is to be done*, and what he must recognise as most advantageous to his cause; and therefore, in thus acting, his thought must be that it will lead him the most surely through the darkness of his task.

He cannot possibly have any other conception of the nature and the consequences of his course.

As we have said, the behaviour of Hamlet which is the most natural for him in his position, and which occurs instantly to him, is also the most serviceable for his cause. To foresee that, when he pretends to be insane, others will so regard him, and to desire that they should do so, and therefore to sustain the delusion which they put upon the delusion by conduct which should tend to strengthen it—seems to him to amount to the same thing. Therefore to this degree, which is relatively slight, he *plays* the madman. But, because it is essentially *his* truth, the effect of his shattered being, to which his mind, still free, gives vent, so far as it dares, without betraying his secret—because it is *his* torture, his rage, his cry of woe, his agony, thus outwardly expressed, thus fully and entirely made known—therefore this play is not merely a dissimulation.

The only incident that, in any way, suggests any preconcerted arrangement on Hamlet's part is in his appearance before Ophelia in referring

to which she describes his disordered dress. But we are speaking of Hamlet as we see him at the close of the first act. He presented himself at the court and to Ophelia *after* that night—in dramatic time *immediately* after. In his outer appearance he has altered nothing. The dramatic continuity ought not to be broken and thereby destroyed. We outsiders know that meanwhile Ophelia has shown his letters and denied him entrance. Hamlet has

> " a look so piteous in purport
> As if he had been loosed out of hell "

for Ophelia alone.

How loosely does he wear his mask! how transparent it is! He is always showing his true face. The mask hides, not himself, but his secret; and, therefore, it so soon ceases to be useful to him. For as soon as the first opportunity for action comes—and how quickly it comes through the play within the play!—the King knows that the madness was no real madness. From the beginning his evil conscience scented under this madness a design against himself. He makes use of the right words for

Hamlet's behaviour—"puts on"—even before he has listened clandestinely to him:

> "What it should be
> More than his father's death that thus hath put him
> So much from the understanding of himself"—

really the same idea as Hamlet's own "put on." After the King listens his suspicion becomes certainty, and after the play he understands from what knowledge and to what end the madness was simulated.

Hamlet knows very well, at the point which he has then reached, that the old method is worn out. A new one must be found. But, first, his mother is to be enlightened and her conscience appealed to. This is *now*, after he has convinced himself of the guilt of the King, her husband,—this is the most important duty, which lies nearest to him, much nearer than killing the King. But this, in fact, seems to have escaped all observation—the inexorable necessity, according to the meaning of the play, of *just this action.*

That Shakespeare lets this action be intro-

duced by the agency of others and not by Hamlet, by the interest of Polonius as a part of his machination against the Prince—this action not merely as an external agency but rather for the sake of it,—the impersonal power (the Ghost) intervening as the power instantaneously helping all forward, it is this that impresses this scene so powerfully with the stamp of that unparalleled art which characterises the play and makes it the central and turning point of the whole action.

Now comes a circumstance that changes all. *Hamlet kills Polonius.* He must now submit to be sent away to England. Thus, as the opportunity to adopt some new method of proceeding is cut off, the old one, although somewhat worn out, must be continued, because it suits both the King and the Prince; it suits the King to consider the Prince as really insane and so to get rid of him, and it suits the Prince to continue his eccentric behaviour, although more carelessly than before and without taking any pains to dissemble, because he himself has committed a murder.

It may be said, however, that Hamlet feigns only so far as it is necessary to make others reveal themselves. The real feigning is, in fact, always on their side. They all pretend to be honest, and play false parts. Hamlet speaks the truth to them and makes them tell their lies. The seriousness of Hamlet's fate is ever much more to him than the wish and care for his mask. Its use is only incidental, and it is soon cast aside. After the interview with his mother, he dissimulates no more.

In the single instance in which he speaks of his madness to Laertes before the duel, Hamlet makes use of the word *madness* as an explanation:

"you must needs have heard how I am punish'd
With sore distraction."

How full of meaning is this sentence! I shall refer to it again. It is after this fashion that Hamlet feigns. His character is adequately fitted for the task, it is suited to that purpose; and the manner of his dissimulation is the natural way of one who is excellently endowed for it.

After the above statement I must review the scene with his friends, emphatically rejecting the idea that Hamlet makes here and for these friends the first trial of his assumed madness, and above all that he acts from "overwrought nature." No, Hamlet's utterances are altogether too natural for that. They are only the direct translation of the preceding soliloquy, and have just as much of real insanity and just as little of raving as the soliloquy.

The same spirit is there, only modified by the influence of intercourse with others, therefore less violent and more restrained; the same passion as before, but with the effect of the secret combined with the wish to avoid disclosing it. For that reason, he does not need to be positively foolish in order that his friends should not feel "hurt" by his reserve, for they would respect his reticence without any such action.

Let us glance at the scene and endeavour to see what it naturally means.

"So, uncle, there you are—Now to my word.
It is 'Adieu, adieu! remember me.'
I have sworn 't.

Marcellus.
Horatio. } [*Within*] My lord, my lord!

Marcellus. [*Within*] Lord Hamlet!

Horatio. [*Within*] Heaven secure him!

Hamlet. So be it!

Horatio. [*Within*] Hillo, ho, ho, my lord!

Hamlet. Hillo, ho, ho, boy! come, bird, come.

[He naturally answers the hunting-call of Marcellus.]

Enter HORATIO *and* MARCELLUS

Marcellus. How is 't, my noble lord?

Horatio. What news, my lord?

Hamlet. O wonderful!

[Not in a tone as if wishing to lead them on, but in a positive manner.]

Horatio. Good my lord, tell it.

Hamlet. No; you will reveal it.

Horatio. Not I, my lord, by heaven.

Marcellus. Nor I, my lord.

Hamlet. How say you, then; would heart of man once think it?
But you 'll be secret?

Marcellus.
Horatio. } Ay, by heaven, my lord.

Hamlet. There's ne'er a villain dwelling in all Denmark

But he 's an arrant knave.

Horatio. There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave
To tell us this.

Hamlet. Why, right: you are i' the right;
And so, without more circumstance at all,
I hold it fit that we shake hands and part:
You, as your business and desire shall point you,—
For every man has business and desire,
Such as it is,—and for mine own poor part,
Look you, I 'll go pray.

Horatio. These are but wild and whirling words, my lord.

Hamlet. I 'm sorry they offend you, heartily;
Yes, faith, heartily.

Horatio. There 's no offence, my lord.

Hamlet. Yes, by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio,
And much offence too. [He would like to tell them how much.] Touching this vision here,
It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you;
For your desire to know what is between us,
O'ermaster 't as you may. And now, good friends,

As you are friends, scholars, and soldiers,
Give me one poor request.

[No commencement of dissimulation, but rather resignation.]

Horatio. What is 't, my lord? we will.

Hamlet. Never make known what you have seen to-night.

Horatio. } My lord, we will not.
Marcellus. }

Hamlet. Nay, but swear 't.

Horatio. In faith,
My lord, not I.

Marcellus. Nor I, my lord, in faith.

Hamlet. Upon my sword.

Marcellus. We have sworn, my lord, already.

Hamlet. Indeed, upon my sword, indeed.

Ghost [*Beneath*] Swear.

Hamlet. Ah, ha, boy! say'st thou so? art thou there, true-penny?—
Come on—you hear this fellow in the cellarage—
Consent to swear.

Horatio. Propose the oath, my lord.

Hamlet. Never to speak of this that you have seen.
Swear by my sword.

Ghost. [*Beneath*] Swear.

Hamlet. Hic et ubique? then we 'll shift our ground.—

Come hither, gentlemen,
And lay your hands again upon my sword,
Never to speak of this that you have heard.
Swear by my sword.

Ghost. [*Beneath*] Swear.

Hamlet. Well said, old mole! canst work i' the earth so fast?
A worthy pioner!—Once more remove, good friends.

[Hamlet here has the feeling that the Ghost will never more leave him, that from this moment, wherever he is, the Ghost will be near.]

Horatio. O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!

Hamlet. And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.
There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
But come;
Here, as before, never, so help you mercy,
How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself,—

As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on,—
That you, at such times seeing me, never shall,
With arms encumber'd thus, or this head-shake,
Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase,
As 'Well, well, we know,' or 'We could, an if we would,'
Or 'If we list to speak,' or 'There be, an if they might,'
Or such ambiguous giving-out, to note
That you know aught of me: this not to do,
So grace and mercy at your most need help you,
Swear.

Ghost. [*Beneath*] Swear.

Hamlet. Rest, rest, perturbed spirit!—So, gentlemen,
With all my love I do commend me to you;
And what so poor a man as Hamlet is
May do, to express his love and friending to you,
God willing, shall not lack. Let us go in together;
And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
The time is out of joint;—O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!—
Nay, come, let 's go together. [*Exeunt.*"

Where in this scene is there any trace of a

"remarkable *naiveté* with which Hamlet plays the fool"? The scene has nothing whatever of it. It does contain, however, a refutation of that possible misrepresentation. For even in this scene, Hamlet expressly declares his "rôle of lunacy" is something that is to be assumed at a time subsequent to the present scene, and his friends understand this to be his meaning. Yet the critic does not hesitate to declare that "Hamlet makes the first attempt at his rôle on them." Surely it would be the height of absurdity for Hamlet to stand distracted before friends whom he trusted, saying that he *will* become so! And what imaginable aim could he have which would be advanced by any such dissimulation? Horatio and Marcellus have both seen the apparition; upon that point they could not be mistaken. The main thing is, above all, that they shall keep closed lips. For this very reason the Prince would so much the less desire to produce in them a belief in his lunacy; for they would be much more prone to speak of the whole affair in high places. Hamlet's most pressing interest is, therefore, that

his friends should consider him sane and do what he desires. If he represented himself as mad, then he *would be* insane. But his condition is wholly sane, and he does not intend that any one shall trip him by any thoughtlessness *in flagranti.*

IV

After the discussion of two weighty points —the words "my tables," etc., and explaining their meaning in relation to the idea of the poet and to the action of the hero; and Hamlet's resolution to pretend to be insane, and considering the source of this resolution and the nature of the dissimulation,—the scene still contains something which is worthy of attention, because it shows strikingly how the critics have gone to work.

"The time is out of joint;—O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right!"

Critics have made too much of these words. Hamlet means no more and no less than that at the present time in Denmark affairs are in an abnormal and overstrained state. Individually it means: "O cursed spite, that for me who am and must be the poorest upon whom this unholy task falls—better would it have been if I had never been born." When the person

and the situation are expressed in this way, the whole import is simple and natural. Hamlet must feel his situation and he speaks of it in these words, and he cannot fail to gain our sympathy. There is no possible chance for any other interpretation. Hamlet's great necessity and the cause of his misery give to this expression its true and just significance. Most of the critics, following Schlegel, accuse Hamlet of an inclination for craft, artfulness, and dissimulation. "He has a natural tendency to crooked ways." Would Shakespeare have made a man like Horatio so devoted to such a weakling that he does not wish to live after Hamlet's death, and cries out to him:

"Good-night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest"?

Was it like Shakespeare to fancy a soul that had loved "the crooked way" thus sung to rest by flights of angels? The ground upon which Hamlet stands is resonant with murder and treachery and double-dealing; craft, artfulness, dissimulation, knavery, and hypocrisy are all about him; therefore he himself must

move craftily in the service and under the yoke of his purpose. This extremely harsh necessity is put upon him by his task and he must take that course, for otherwise he can never succeed. He must hide himself insidiously behind craft, he must outwit cunning. Therefore it is no symptom of weakness, as the critic affirms, when in the second act he says "About, my brain!"—in place of "my hands." Shakespeare wrote "brain" as a proof of his correct insight into the real state of affairs, for in very truth Hamlet's brain is his only weapon. We must always keep the situation and the environment in mind.

This entire court, the society it represents, this whole kingdom, is morally and politically sunk into an abnormal condition of degradation. The expression, "There is something rotten in the state of Denmark," comes from simple Marcellus, but we see that not only "something" but rather *very much* is corrupt. When a man like Claudius sits upon the throne and reigns with the consent of all the realm, the state is in decadence; society, from the

highest to the lowest ranks, is in a depraved condition. The whole atmosphere is polluted; poison, treachery, and hypocrisy have rule, dissolute life has license. There is wild intoxication on the outside, on the inside falsehood and sensuality. There is no incentive for an honest, worthy man like Horatio. A miasma lies over Elsinore, where an irreclaimable criminal holds the throne.

A change in a wrong direction progresses rapidly in the world. One evil person can easily destroy what ten good men can with difficulty create. This traitor, poisoner, hypocrite, seducer, liar, craftily evading a conviction of murder, ruins a royal house and all who are connected with it. Fortinbras will have plenty to do; for in Denmark there is indeed much to be "set right."

To perceive in the appearance of Fortinbras at the close of the play the approach of a better time, offering with the advent of the energetic young hero the prospect of an assured future, is incorrect. By no means is there surety of any such prospect as at the

close of *Macbeth* and *Richard III.* It is impossible to foresee what the future will be. The seriousness of the situation is very much greater in *Hamlet.*

Fortinbras has certainly the promise of a more peaceful "setting to right" than the Prince. He finds, so to speak, a clear field before him and can proceed as the Prince never of his own free will could have done. The curtain does not fall until Fortinbras himself tells us, "For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune." But Hamlet must punish a crime; for this reason Hamlet "must go pray"—pray that a higher power will come to his aid, and from this feeling of his situation he breaks out with the words:

> "The time is out of joint;—O cursed spite
> That ever I was born to set it right!"

Soon the actors arrive and Hamlet instantly seizes upon the opportunity: "Can you play the Murther of Gonzago? We 'll ha 't tomorrow night." He recognises his opportunity and utilizes it with great tact, as the best possible for his purpose. It is the best means

for his end, for he must, for his own conviction, however strong his suspicions may be, have an objective proof, a living, breathing proof, a witness of flesh and blood to confirm these suspicions.

However trustworthy the ghost of his father may seem, to Hamlet he is only a ghost. "An honest ghost," he says. Yes! for the ghost had only communicated to him that of which he himself had felt the presentiment and which his own feeling had suggested to him. But still doubts must creep in and give room for the suspicion of some deception, some unreal ghostly design; and if there had been deception it would certainly be so horrible that only the Devil himself could have conceived it. How can any one impugn this feeling of Hamlet, this longing for real proof, as a weakness? Would not such a man as he need more testimony to convince him than his own imagination, and stronger confirmation than that given by the midnight appearance of a spirit from purgatory? On the contrary, Hamlet's strength is shown by his calling the situation in which he

finds himself to account, as it were, as he did that midnight occurrence on the terrace. He is right when he says:

> "The devil hath power
> To assume a pleasing shape; yea and perhaps
> Out of my weakness and my melancholy"—

and by this weakness he does not mean a weak will, but rather his blind outlook into the dark and the mental disturbance resulting from that condition—

> "Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
> As he is very potent with such spirits,
> Abuses me to damn me."

Ought these words to be regarded only as an expression of his indecision, only as an illustration of his weak will? What a frightful error not to see that the only difference considered here is that of the objective and subjective! The real meaning is that all he knows is what a ghost has told him. The ghost is no mere vision to Hamlet, no outward reflection of his inner self. The ghost demands the punishment of his murderer. Three other persons in whom the Prince has confidence see the ghost

at the same time and hear his command from underground; Hamlet, however, alone knows his communication and the individual testimony remains locked within his own soul.

Hamlet certainly needs more proof from the very character of the crime. No one could imagine that the ghostly message should be a sufficient motive for an act of revenge. No, the sufficing motive lies here, as everywhere in the drama, in the actual. The motive must come from a living person. From whom then? From the enemy, from the traitor himself against whom Hamlet has the right to vengeance, he *must* have this evidence because he ought to punish the traitor. According to the law of tragedy, Hamlet can obtain this evidence only from the criminal; otherwise it does not really exist. As I have said, Hamlet chooses the best means to his end. For the court-play, by the vividness with which it represents the murder, the surprise of the King at finding himself confronted with his secret in the full glare of the footlights, as it were—this, if he committed the crime, must bring him to confession.

How much is hereby gained! The first indispensable step towards the solution of Hamlet's problem is actually taken; now, indeed, he first *knows* his way. And that Hamlet knows without doubt that confession is the point upon which all depends is seen here; here at the close of this soliloquy he says:

"That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions."

Confessed! And on the spot! Herein is the effectiveness of the course on which Hamlet decides.

Let us consider this soliloquy, the interpretation of which by most critics I cannot accept. What does Hamlet say?

"O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in 's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting

With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What 's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would
he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with
tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears.
Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing; no, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damn'd defeat was made. Am I a coward?
Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across?
Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my face?
Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i' the
throat,
As deep as the lungs? who does me this?
Ha!
'Swounds, I should take it; for it cannot be
But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall

To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should have fatted all the region kites
With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
O vengeance!
Why, what an ass am I? This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murther'd,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,
A scullion!
Fie upon 't! foh! About, my brain! I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions;
For murther, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. I 'll have these players
Play something like the murther of my father
Before mine uncle; I 'll observe his looks;
I 'll tent him to the quick; if he but blench,
I know my course. The spirit that I have seen

May be the devil; and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. I 'll have grounds
More relative than this; the play 's the thing
Wherein I 'll catch the conscience of the king."

Does this mean that he (Hamlet) has until now seen the affair from a wrong point of view? Has he bungled about the whole business? Have people no appreciation of a situation so intolerable that it brings him to the point where he assails himself? Have they no sense of a righteous indignation which, because it cannot reach its object, turns against itself, in order to vent its wrath at the impossibility of action by self-reproach and self-depreciation? Is it his will to be a dull and muddy-mettled rascal? Does he condemn himself out of cowardice, incapacity, morbid scrupulousness, weakness of will, and all such imaginary motives? Is he not rather forced to be what he is? He can say nothing for a king upon whose property and most dear life a defeat has been made!

That is the very horror of his position—to be compelled not to speak a syllable to the point. If he had chosen to do even that, most assuredly and instantly he would have lost all. And the critics insist upon condemning him because he knows this and declares it, and *does* nothing. The actor can talk of Priam's death so movingly! Had he *Hamlet's* motive, *his* cue for passion, he would drown the stage with tears, because he with the freedom of the actor *can act.* But Hamlet cannot do that; for him it is no play, but reality, and he must suffer wreck because he can furnish no proof of the reality. *He* must be silent and only work indirectly; he can only look on and watch and wait. And when he says:

"Am I a coward?
Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across?
Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my face?
Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i' the throat,
As deep as to the lungs? who does me this?
Ha!
'Swounds, I should take it"—

what enrages Hamlet is that he must appear to be what he says, that he must seem to be guilty of such weakness from the very necessity of his task, on account of the duty that the performance of it entails. That he has this intolerable condition to bear, that he feels all this and yet must let himself be baffled and dares not act, enrages him. And when he says:

> " For it cannot be
> But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall
> To make oppression bitter, or ere this
> I should have fatted all the region kites
> With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!
> Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain! "—

this also is an outbreak of his wrath at not being permitted to follow his first impulse, the immediate prompting of the thirst for revenge. He is thus enraged because his reason is so strong as to restrain him; and because he restrains himself he has to suffer. To smite down the King, to sacrifice his own life by the blow, in order to be rid of his task at once instead

of fulfilling it,—that were the first, the easiest thing for him, but he wills to fulfil it, to fulfil it faithfully and not shamefully shirk it. His *will tames* his heart, the gnashing hunger for revenge, and that is the agony that makes his blood boil; from that nature revolts, every fibre quivers in rebellion and anguish; *so strong* is the will in him that he endures this torture in the fear and reverence of his sacred duty. What he rails at as "pigeon-livered" when the mortal nature, impatient of pain, weary of suffering, cries out in him,—all this is enduring courage, the courage of reason, springing from reverence for a holy duty and from devotion to it.

With the words, "Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain," he reaches the climax of revolt; his nature breaks out in the cry, "O vengeance!" He is so bound that he cannot stir and cannot strike as he would like to do, and he cries, in deepest agony:

"Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murther'd,

Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,
A scullion!"

Can any one read that and still be doubtful whether it is a question of a subjective impossibility or of something objectively impossible in itself?

"Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,"—*must, must!* Is not that clear? And with "Fie upon't, foh!" Hamlet closes the passage—that is the seal upon it; and it is not against himself but rather against the constraint, the utter intolerableness of the situation. After these words he turns to his inner self, to what alone remains to him of means and weapons:

"About, my brain!"

And then comes the closing passage, which is the special point of the soliloquy, the key to the understanding of it:

"I have heard
That guilty creatures, sitting at a play,
Have by the very cunning of the scene

Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions;
For murder, though it have no tongue, will
speak
With most miraculous organ. I 'll have these
players
Play something like the murder of my father,
Before mine uncle. I 'll observe his looks;
I 'll tent him to the quick; if he but blench,
I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil, and the devil hath power
T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy—
As he is very potent with such spirits—
Abuses me to damn me. I 'll have grounds
More relative than this; the play 's the thing
Wherein I 'll catch the conscience of the king."

This soliloquy is not a complaint of Hamlet against himself, but wholly a complaint about his situation; and he complains and revolts from it personally just because he obeys the demands of his duty. He would not be able to hold out in the undertaking without giving this vent to his feelings.

For this reason, the course to which he is forced calls for the passionate outburst that we have in the soliloquy. There is nothing in this or in the other soliloquies that can truly be said to have a double meaning; neither can the charge be made that the mode of expression furnishes any cause for such misconstruction. All the expressions of the meaning are throughout clear and to the point.

There is no reason why the character of the hero should not be clearly comprehended. Ought we to have learned the King's character in the beginning of the play, and that Hamlet cannot vanquish him by a dagger-thrust? Should Shakespeare have said this explicitly? He lets Hamlet tell it all in his soliloquies; it is put in the clearest light by the action; it is cried plainly into the ear of the spectator. If Shakespeare had explained the plan in any other way, how could Horatio, who was the Prince's confidant, tell us anything? The action of the play is not to be judged by the usual critical standards.

V

The second act closes, according to the modern accepted division, with the soliloquy, to which I have just referred. The action advances immediately. The King appears with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

> "And can you, by no drift of circumstance,
> Get from him why he puts on this confusion,
> Grating so harshly all his days of quiet
> With turbulent and dangerous lunacy?"

Afterwards it is arranged to have Ophelia in waiting for Hamlet, and then Hamlet steps forward again with the soliloquy:

> "To be or not to be," etc.

If the whole play were known as thoroughly as this soliloquy is, there would not be the slightest doubt of what Hamlet meant. His question is not "what holds me back from making way with myself? or wherefore do I shrink from it when I could do it now?" Hamlet does not con-

cern himself with either the one or the other idea; nor about any immediate and direct determination. The soliloquy is the continuation of the previous one, and therefore I should prefer not to divide it from that by the end of an act. The fundamental question, however, is this: Should it be held as self-accusing or not? If it *is* self-accusing, then the drift is: "Truly it were nobler if it would not be cowardly; the motive that impels us to suicide might be indeed effective and prudent, though not praiseworthy and courageous but rather cowardly."

In this explanation Hebler concurs. "Self-murder," he says, "engages Hamlet's thought as analogous to his imposed task, and Hamlet himself gives the answer: people shrink from suicide from the same common reason that you omit acting—from sheer cowardice and cowardly doubt."

This criticism rests on the supposition that Hamlet may not be on the right track, and that his soliloquy seems like self-condemnation, a self-dissection in order to conquer his weakness and hesitation.

If, however, the earlier soliloquy is understood as I have represented it, the present one will appear in a wholly different light. It is not to be regarded as in logical sequence to the passage in the first soliloquy:

> "Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter;"

as if suicide were Hamlet's original theme to which he has just come back in order to discuss it more fully. By no means is this true. It is a momentary outbreak similar to that of Imogen in *Cymbeline:*

> "Against self-slaughter
> There is a prohibition so divine
> That cravens my weak hand."

But Hamlet's continuation of the subject is in his usual quiet reflective manner. The painful frame of mind which breaks forth therein unburdens itself in the consideration whether it would not be better to throw off such a burden than to carry it, and why should one carry it—out of fear?—Yes, truly, but of what nature and of what spirit this fear is—that is the sec-

ond point upon which the interpretation of the soliloquy hinges. We stand in the dark, not knowing why or where; everything remains for us a question of a *perhaps*. We are neither sure of the meaning of our suffering, nor acquainted with what follows after death, if anything does follow. This not-knowing, the thorn and allurement and pain and limitation, is the cradle and grave of our meditation and research. This ban which necessitates our waiting, letting things take their course, suggests the question whether it is nobler without directly questioning about death "to take up arms" against sorrow or simply to endure it here; because we do not know but on the other side of the grave something still worse may be in store for us; the thus-far and no-farther of human speculation, the darkness out of which it springs and from which it shrinks back, its own "to-be or not-to-be" in one. That is the reflection which is suggested by the soliloquy. It does not consider any special phase but deals in general with existence itself, with the darkness in which it is shrouded.

I do not, therefore, consider it appropriate that the climax word of the soliloquy is "conscience"—

"But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all."

Conscience? No! Conscience is not the real motive here; that is, not in the moral sense. The soliloquy is certainly pure reflection; reflection alone operates and it alone decides. The immediate sequel says that explicitly:

"Thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of *thought*,"

and therefore Shakespeare used the word *conscience*. The sense, the weight and consideration above all contemplation, the theoretical nature, the thing in man which makes man, and which conscience lays hold of—*that* is the core of the soliloquy, not conscience in the ordinary sense. Apparently from the special practical question

whether the remedy—that is, suicide—is not too desperate for the effort to be free from the burden of evil, Hamlet involves himself in speculations that carry him to the very limit of human understanding, which brings us to a standstill and sends us back to what we can really comprehend. That is the root of this deliberation, its true purpose; and, therefore, although Hamlet does not specifically mention God's command and the duty of the assigned task, yet they are both present in spirit, in the very nature of his reflections.

How Hamlet respects God's command we know already. How much more does he now when the holy obligation and office of a judge have fallen upon himself! It gives more weight to that command for him, but also at the same time makes it so much the more inviolable.

He will fulfil this command and do naught else. He has no idea that it would be nobler to take some other course. On the contrary, what conscience says to him is this: his duty, his task, their existence, even their spirit, is

unalterable; and "conscience" in this reflection shows that these must be the subject of all his thoughts. "Thought and contemplation," says Hamlet, "make us cowards"—or we are all rational beings, for to be without conscience would make us only brutal—yes, really cowards! —at the will of the spirit and understanding. Hamlet says this out of the bitter feeling of his need, which presses upon him, which no one knows about except himself. The soliloquy is not doctrinal; it is the passionate utterance of an individual, of the same character that we heard shortly before, somewhat quieter, but still the same, ever Hamlet's. One forgets how much the absence of colouring comes from the situation of the speaker because it is so true, because it is so necessary for him; because he cannot do what he ought to do and would like to do, on that account he calls himself "coward." It is so tormenting to him because conscience urges him to act; therefore the tincture of bitterness in tone against it. Therefore he calls that privilege of man which is his highest right "fear"—the desire which, leaving this

sphere behind, finds rest only at the limit which is out of sight, which belongs to the supernatural, but which the soul seeks; and who knows all that means better than Hamlet? What tragic hero ever gave more honour to intellectual power by means of his action and by his suffering than he? This positive element in spite of the colouring of the soliloquy, and in spite of the impatience and the misery which pulsate more violently again in him towards the end, sounds ever through the bitterness of his words. *It is a suspension of conscience and nothing else!* That all our sorrow and our need spring out of that which ennobles us—that is the dominant chord of the soul of Hamlet, that is the inspiring tone which gives its grace to his bitterness. It arises from the same feeling that Shakespeare himself felt when, in another place (Sonnet 66), he says:

"Tir'd with all these, for restful death I cry,—
As, to behold desert a beggar born,
And needy nothing trimm'd in jollity,
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,
And gilded honour shamefully misplac'd,

And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
And right perfection wrongfully disgrac'd,
And strength by limping sway disabled,
And art made tongue-tied by authority,
And folly doctor-like controlling skill,
And simple truth miscall'd simplicity,
And captive good attending captain ill;
Tir'd with all these, from these would I be gone,
Save that, to die, I leave my love alone."

That is Shakespeare's personal utterance, and we hear also what he speaks to us out of the mouth of Hamlet. Shakespeare has laid bare the whole dark side of his own experience; and as the tenderness of love holds him fast to his own existence, so reflection and holy duty influence his hero.

Outside of fear and cowardice, which we have already discussed, there are other ideas which tend to deceive us concerning reckless action: "the native hue of resolution," and "enterprises of great pith and moment." These phrases mislead those only who have no time to devote to psychological truth or to dramatic art.

"And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought."

Shakespeare writes "native" and that certainly means "inborn," "innate." The special idea here is the native (natural) colour, which symbolises the immediate impulse, the blind pressure of desire and blood which, checked by thought, is broken, and brought by being overburdened to a standstill, afterwards to reflection, to consciousness; and it ought to be so, if man will be man, whose natural rosiness the spirit's pallor transiently sickens. For there are two kinds of health, and if a man is pale with thought and not blood-red, can he in this state only be said to be God's image? Therefore Hamlet says:

"But that the dread of something after death
. . . puzzles the will."

Yes, indeed! *The will*—not the reason and the conscience by which it is purified, not the "pale cast" of thought, the light of the mind, but rather that which is the direct opposite of these—the direct impulse, the blind will of the

wild beast, that of desire which has no other attribute but the natural colour of blood, the same desire that would like to make a quick ending. The words "native hue," which Shakespeare uses in contradistinction to the pallor of thought, have the full ring of positive assertion. The words seem ambiguous but agree directly with the meaning of the soliloquy.

> "And enterprises of great pith and moment
> With this regard their currents turn awry
> And lose the name of action,"—

even that of the reckless kind of action, of that resolution whose natural colour has been spoken of. We shall see in the play how such action, full of "pith and moment," is *not* turned "awry" from its current by such reflection, and the pallor of thought leads up to act and deed; for the practical resolution may be only natural desire, as the course of the play proves. This soliloquy becomes so great and so tragic by the shape that Shakespeare gave it.

After the scene with Ophelia, the King sees through the dissimulation of the Prince, and decides immediately upon the plan of sending him to England. Polonius assents, and with the words of the King,

"It shall be so.
Madness in great ones must not unwatch'd go,"

act second ought to close.

VI

In act third Hamlet prepares his experiment, —he has neglected nothing up to this point,— the play will be presented and he will get the objective proof that he needed, and will also have confirmation by means of Horatio's testimony. He obtains the King's acknowledgment of guilt, but only as pantomime; he has not yet had any spoken confession. It suffices for his own moral conviction and that of his friend; but if nothing further is added to it, nothing has been gained so far as the belief of the world is concerned. Both the avenger and the traitor know and understand each other. Both are unmasked. Both are convicted in each other's eyes. The traitor is almost beside himself from the possibility of betraying his secret, and the peril of trying to avoid justice. He can escape because he is King and the entire court is at his beck and call. They have all noticed, more or less, the design and

meaning of the play and the impression and the effect on the King.

But the question is, how much of these impressions do they retain, and what use do they make of them? The relation of the fictitious marriage in the play to the real ceremony which they have seen is indubitable; but the people have taken no offence at the real one and therefore can take none at the ideal representation of the same. They perceive only Hamlet's anger and revolt, which are nothing new to them.

There is no mention of adultery in the play —the mother is to be spared. In the pantomime which precedes the representation, the poisoner first plots the murder to gain the woman, and later, after the action of the poisoning, Hamlet expressly tells the audience,

> "You shall see anon how the murtherer gets the love of Gonzago's wife."

The murder, however, is discovered! Murder is cried aloud throughout the play. Hamlet insinuates that it is a "mouse-trap," that it is a cunningly contrived artifice. The mur-

derer is a young relative of the aged duke; the crime happens in a garden by poisoning, only it is a man that does the deed instead of a snake; and—after this action the King starts up and runs away.

What ought the people to think? Can any one of the company ascribe the King's behaviour and his flight to any other cause than what he has seen and heard? Polonius cries in behalf of the company: "Give o'er the play." All that the public see in the play is the displeasure of the King and Hamlet's revolt. The company will only wish to echo what Polonius says later to the Queen, "Tell him his pranks have been too broad to bear with," and what Guildenstern says to Hamlet, "the King is in his retirement marvellous distempered," and "not from drink" but rather "with choler." They will *not* wish to see what may be more or less suspected. Suspicion against royalty would be a crime or an impropriety which should not be encouraged.

We can therefore perceive how little hold Hamlet has on this company which makes up

his world. All the people would be concerned in the judicial procedure which he has to conduct, they are his jury. Not one takes part with him, no one save his Horatio. All have withdrawn from him after this demonstration as from a miscreant who has struck at the crown. They have all run after the King. Polonius has flown to the King's service, to overhear in the King's behalf the conversation between mother and son. Rosencranz and Guildenstern, acknowledging the sacred majesty of the King, are already at hand to conduct the Prince to England. Hebler finds fault with Hamlet "for having allowed the King to run away." The King, he says, "has virtually confessed and Hamlet might strike at him after a short explanation. Why does not Hamlet compel the King to repeat in words what is to be inferred from his behaviour? Why does Hamlet allow the affair to end unsuccessfully?"

But the court manifests no emotion at the pantomimic confession. For Hamlet and Horatio the King's action is a direct proof of guilt, but not for the other spectators. Let

us suppose that the company did not prevent the thrust at the King and that it succeeded. What would then be attained? Nothing!

The critic's mistake originates in his impatience for the "duty-impelled stroke"; but if it fell as hastily and unwisely as he would like to have it, the single duty about which the Prince is concerned would be entirely thwarted instead of being fulfilled.

Hamlet, who needs the play for evidence, calls out:

> "Now could I drink hot blood,
> And do such bitter business as the day
> Would quake to look on."

Thorough judges of human nature, who have no confidence in Hamlet and do not believe that he will bring anything to a conclusion, forget that he may be able to do more and do better *because* he forbears to act. Hamlet is yet man enough and has spirit enough to control himself.

Then he goes to his mother, and on his way Hamlet finds the King at prayer—the King who here, *for the first time*, makes a verbal con-

fession before us that he is the murderer while confessing the crime to himself. So far have Hamlet and the poet brought him by means of the play. Here is progress in the rôle of the King, and from the negative side in the play. There is a depth or power of invention here which has not its parallel, the wisdom in the *rhythm of the development.* It is this which, if I may speak for myself, moves me most deeply. The *tempo* of the onward movement in the play, how measured is its step!—the course it takes, appearing to drag and yet hurried onward by the storm of God, Heaven and Hell thundering together!

At this moment Hamlet finds the King alone, unarmed and unprotected. He draws his dagger, for after what he has learned from the play he dares to kill him; he wills to do it—and does not do it. And we know that this is well. He would defeat his purpose if he now made the King dumb before the world, when the first attack upon him by means of the play had succeeded in wresting from him at least the pantomime of a confession. Will it be replied, "No!

for from this time the King will protect himself with good reason; now that he has learned the daring and the power of the avenger, there will be no further opportunity for Hamlet to attack him"? But Hamlet stands *inside* and *not* outside the action, and his own confidence in what he is capable of doing strengthens him. He knows, indeed, that his purpose is discovered. As he knows the enemy, so after this encounter the enemy knows him, and will do all in his power to destroy him and thus escape from the vengeance that threatens him. Hamlet knows this, and must be prepared for it and trust to his righteous cause. This is the one motive which restrains him. And even if nothing further should come out of it for the advancement of his purpose, if future developments should neutralise or destroy the present advantage, Hamlet dares not be the one through whose action it comes to naught. This would be the result if he struck at the King now. He can never by his own testimony alone accomplish his task if he makes the guilty one dumb for ever.

Hamlet himself, it is true, does not say this to us. No! But the facts say it for him. He himself says that for the King to die at this moment when he is praying would be so favourable to him that the stroke should be delayed until he can be made to fall past hope of salvation. Is it supposed to be a mere subterfuge of Hamlet's irresolution that he considers the moment when the King is praying is not the favourable moment for him to die? Is it a refinement of Hamlet's subtle theorising about revenge by which he imposes upon himself?[1] Are the critics struck with blindness? How

[1] Shakespeare had no idea of making Hamlet appear weak in not killing the King when at prayer; and the critics are clearly wrong in regarding the reason Hamlet gives as a mere excuse for delay. Shakespeare simply expresses the current belief of the time, that a sinner who dies while repenting is absolved from his guilt and his soul is saved. Many illustrations of this might be cited from contemporaneous literature. One must suffice here. In Beaumont and Fletcher's *Maid's Tragedy*, the heroine, when killing the King to avenge her wrong, says:

"I 'll take thee unprepared ! thy fears upon thee
That make thy sins look double ! And so send thee
(By my revenge I will) to look those torments
Prepared for such black souls." [*Translator.*]

does the King fall at last? He so falls that we see that every other way would be more lenient, would be "hire and salary, not revenge," not the vengeance to which the criminal is condemned. He does not finally fall in a sudden fit, nor while drunk, asleep, or gaming—then his fate would have been all too easy,—but he falls in fact when in the very act of doing what puts him so utterly beyond all hope of salvation that even from the threatening words of Hamlet, terrible as they are, we neither can or should, when he utters them, anticipate the catastrophe. The reader or auditor, even as little as Hamlet himself, has any premonition of the result. The King falls in perpetrating a crime even greater than his first, at the moment when he is committing a threefold murder. Rather than be betrayed he suffers even his own wife to drink the poison which he had prepared for Hamlet; in this moment utterly hopeless of salvation he falls, so that his soul will be "as damned and black as hell whereto it goes." *Thus* the poet fulfils the words of Hamlet. *Thus* do they express to the letter Shakespeare's

idea of vengeance, of punishment, of judgment, in such a case as this—*his* way of dealing justice to *this* transgressor. And it must not be forgotten that it is Hamlet who brings the King to this end. *He alone does it by his hits* and *by his misses*, by the play he uses and by the killing of Polonius. These things so work that "this physic but prolongs the sickly days" of the criminal.

Then he hastens to his mother, delaying the stroke, as he must, and putting it wholly out of mind, for his interest in the salvation of his mother is now infinitely the nearer and more pressing duty. As to striking the King down without bringing him to justice, he could do that the very next hour and more appropriately than now.

How does the fact of Hamlet's knowing already that he must go to England speak against him for sparing the praying King? He cannot calculate upon what shall happen before he goes or whether he can make use of the results of this journey for the accomplishment of his task; neither could he possibly know that he

would kill Polonius so soon or what would follow as the result of that action.

Furious and frantic he rushes in wildly to his mother. He hears the cry behind the tapestry, and now supposing the King to be hidden there, he allows himself to be carried away by his hot impulsive rage, here in this place and in this still hour, close by the bed where he himself was begotten, where the worst personal dishonour had been inflicted upon him, here where the whole air is full of it—here the voice of the wretch (he is thinking only of the King and therefore believes that it is the King whom he has heard) calls up all his shame, and, forgetting the strict obligation of his task, he gives full course to his thirst for vengeance—for after the proof by means of the play, he is, of course, *morally* free to kill the King,—he is carried away into the grave error of plunging his sword through the tapestry. A grave error indeed! For there is no question here of his *moral* right and power. This is the turning-point of the play which includes in itself the second cardinal moment for the understand-

ing of the whole. The first, that which I call the fundamental point, is the *conditio sine qua non* that guards the treasure, which can be exhumed only with the help and by the power of the second. Only with this second point do we get an insight into the *tragic depth* of the drama, into the plot. To understand this turning-point is to understand Hamlet.

Something new is here before us, something surprising for which we were not prepared. Hamlet commits an error! *and this error is Hamlet!*

But from now all hinges on this error, and of this error only shall we have to speak. That Hamlet stabs at the tapestry is no proof forsooth that he was a coward and would not have risked the act face to face with the enemy; it is wholly the expression and act of his blind passion.

Without stopping to consider whether he hit or miss, he stabs like lightning blindly into the dark; he looks neither to the right nor left; he listens only to his own thirst for vengeance and is deaf to his duty.

He has made the thrust at last. What has he accomplished? He has committed murder! And instead of being freed from the old burden, he has brought a new one upon his soul; instead of accomplishing what he was bound to do, he has become a criminal! Thus the error punishes itself!

"But," say the critics, "if he had only slain the King before, which would have been no crime, he would have saved himself from this real crime now. *That* was his error and for that error he commits *this*—and for *that* he is punished by *this!*" Not at all! For then he would have committed a far greater error! Now there lies upon his soul a crime, a death-blow, but an undesigned blow, more an unfortunate than a guilty act; but in the other case, had he killed the King he would, indeed, have kept himself morally pure, but his duty, the one great object and aim of his being, would have been ruined, shattered into atoms, and his father would have remained for ever unavenged.

It is for this, for his cause, that he becomes a criminal; so wild, so narrow and precipitous,

so perilous is the path in which his destined task urges him, that he has become a murderer in its service, because for once he has not kept in the course which it prescribed, because for once he has forgotten his true duty, because he has almost trifled away its opportunity. But he has not rendered himself wholly powerless and he remains firm in his purpose. He is still able to serve his cause. Therefore the opinion which Gervinus expresses is false: "This failure of vengeance must now compel him most powerfully to act at last in earnest." The reverse of this is true. If anything could occur to bring him to his senses, to impress upon him the necessity of checking the pace of his action, it is this failure, this misthrust, precisely this!

If instead of Polonius it had been the King whom he had stabbed, what would he not have brought upon himself! What a disgraceful, wretched, irretrievable blow would he have struck! Fearfully near has he come, out of blind rage, to ruining his whole cause, ruining it in the most shameful and blundering manner.

Accident alone, so to speak, has saved him. This consideration, above all things, must be brought home to him by the serious mistake which he has made, with overpowering and humiliating irony, bidding him beware how he comes any nearer to so fatal an end.

More pressingly and emphatically than ever must he feel himself obliged to proceed slowly and with redoubled caution; he must indeed feel himself driven to a standstill since he has suffered himself by a senseless burst of passion to stumble into the abyss to which he had come, driven to a full pause from the shock in his own mind, even though he perceives no circumstances forcing him thereto. And so the killing of Polonius is the turning-point of the drama.

And yet all goes rapidly forward with him! And therefore the idea is doubly wrong and false that the error which he has committed must of necessity impel him to attack the King at once. And so—because he *must*—he submits quietly to be sent to England; still more passively than ever does he bear himself. He has by a blunder almost lost the game, has played

into the hands of his opponent. He must begin anew and from a worse position than before. The guilt of bloodshed lies upon him, which his madness, now become so transparent, does not conceal. In the eye of the world he is a dangerous character to be placed under legal restraint, imprisoned and kept from doing harm. He is in the power of the King. He sees, however, that the enemy will not aim directly at his life; he is to be got rid of by cunning. "Hide fox and all after!" must now be the game to be followed. His brain may well be trusted to accept the game against the brains of his opponents. The enemy means to attack him with underground snares, and he must seek on his part to dig a fathom deeper.

On his way to the ship which is to carry him to England he meets the army of young Fortinbras, and at the sight of that untrammelled freedom of motion Hamlet's soul, tortured by the iron yoke of his task, breaks out into bitter murmuring. If he could only be as that happy man is! Alas, that he must be what that man has been spared from being, and what no one

would wish to be—*must be*, and not from his nature and disposition, but rather by the dispensation of God! That is the feeling which utters itself in Hamlet's fifth and last soliloquy:

"How all occasions do inform against me
And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.
Sure, He that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
To fust in us unus'd. Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on the event,—
A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward,—I do not know
Why yet I live to say 'This thing 's to do,'
Sith I have cause and will and strength and means
To do 't. Examples gross as earth exhort me;
Witness this army of such mass and charge,
Led by a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd

Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour's at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep, while to my shame I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
That for a fantasy and trick of fame
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain? O, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!"

This means that Hamlet is revolting at his task, but not at himself, not at that which he is to do, but rather what he must *suffer* by it; not at what he makes out of it, but rather what it makes out of him. His imperative destiny speaks, not his own misfortune, with *his voice*, because he is its victim, and therefore his

bitterness rings out against it as if against himself. "How all occasions do inform against me"—yes, indeed, "inform," for *he is obliged to do* what he cannot and yet must do if there is a God in heaven!

"And spur my dull revenge"—yes, "spur," but not from lack of his own courage, but rather because of *their nature!* This delay oppresses him—the situation which he calls "beastly," which benumbs his reason, for he does not know how he can use it in the service of his revenge. Thus far it seems to have been of no use. And yet the task must be performed. Hamlet has *power* and *means* indeed for that, and he himself expressly states here that he has also the *will:*

"Sith I have cause and will and strength and means."

Power and means? *The physical!* He can strike down the guilty one. He could slay him with one blow. Why not then? Leave to oblivion his father's murder, his mother's shame? Stand disgraced before Fortinbras and his soldiers? Why not rather, as he has com-

plained so bitterly, scorn the thought, the spirit, and the reason of his revenge, act against their will, and, instead of fulfilling the task, drown it in blood and with it himself?

That is what the soliloquy says. Hamlet himself thinks and *must* think that he could do what he ought and would like to do! And he *must* think so because the crime of the King cannot be allowed to remain unpunished, because justice is necessary and must be accomplished for the sake of the eternal right which is inherent in it. And yet it has not been accomplished, and its accomplishment seems for the time to be farther off than ever. The opportunity of success has been utterly lost by his error! Therefore, at this moment, he is so discouraged that he scorns his own true thoughts! Therefore he cries out despairingly:

"I do not know
Why yet I live to say—'This thing 's to do.'"

Surely it must come to pass, and Hamlet lives indeed to say it and to bring it about. And yet he seems to live on forgetful of it, and now

most forgetful when he has paralysed his means and power.

What would Hamlet like? He would like to unite what in his situation is so difficult and does not admit of union,—reason and passion! The instinct of his reason rises against the spirit of his revenge, and that instinct respects this spirit and therefore revolts because of this respect. This is the inner truth, the poetic secret of this soliloquy; this struggle is the tragic element in it, hence its interest and significance.

Hamlet is weary under his burden. Now, when he is shipped off to England, the charge of murder resting on him through his own fault, comparing his lot with that of Fortinbras, who is so free in all his movements, now comes the fear—now at this moment of pause which separates him at such a distance from his foe and from the carrying out of his revenge through his own fault—now comes to him more than ever the fearful apprehension that, notwithstanding all his pains, all his patient endurance, his task has at last become impossible.

This horrible dread weighs down his soul. Would it not be better to strike the blow at once and ruin his cause, sacrifice it, become a traitor to it, than still to go on hoping and waiting and yet not succeed after all, because success is impossible? He himself to all appearances has already in part rendered it so by his bungling and because no *help* comes to him *from above!* How, considering the character of his task, which is unapproachable, not to be got at, how he is to satisfy the reason of the thing he cannot conceive, but he can at least gratify his passionate impulse to strike the decisive blow; and how it shrieks in his ear and how it surges over his soul!

This horrible doubt is a very different thing from the cowardly complaining temper which has been ascribed to him. The horrible doubt has for its background the remorse which he feels for the error of which he has been guilty and which turns doubt into despair, the doubt whether he shall throw all the dictates of reason to the winds. This is the demon that rules this soliloquy and runs wild therein; it is the

shriek of Hamlet's agony which here relieves itself.

And while he raves with this demon and endures tortures, *his cause* is *already ripening towards its accomplishment*, already it is as good as fulfilled without its being suspected either by Hamlet or by us. and *through his error.*

VII

In the scene which contains the soliloquy just discussed I must call attention to one point which has been unnoticed by the critics, and which should be taken into account—that is, the meaning of the contrast between Fortinbras and Hamlet—in order to gain a more correct idea than the current one. I have referred to this point once before. It means, as usually understood, that the active character of Fortinbras ought to be regarded as the positive contrast to the lack in Hamlet's nature on account of which he does not act, or acts only when it is too late. That this was not the opinion of the poet can be proved in this scene by Hamlet's own words, for he not only calls the military expedition a "fantasy and trick of fame" but says of it:

"This is the imposthume of much wealth and peace,

That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
Why the man dies."

That signifies: if all goes well with these men, they plan in their arrogance undertakings that cause danger and destruction.

If Fortinbras had to fight such a battle as Hamlet had, the warlike brawl would be ignored in the seriousness of a great and sacred task. Fortinbras and his expedition do not impress Hamlet at all, because he knows a weightier duty is imposed on him and he has much more to think of. It fosters the bitterness in him, he makes an ill use of the impression against himself from inner wrath; but he knows very well how to estimate it at its proper value. Hamlet knows that "truly to be great" means fighting for a far greater cause than a mere trifle when honour is at stake; but he knows at the same time that it means not to arouse one's self without some great object, and this Fortinbras fails to have.

Now follows the sea voyage. Hamlet,—as we learn from his communication to Horatio in the fifth act,—in the same frame of mind as

when we left him, sleepless in his cabin, is tormented in regard to his all-too-correct suspicion of the royal document of which Rosencranz and Guildenstern are the bearers. He gets possession of the letter while they sleep. He sees therein, "black on white," his death-warrant. He writes another letter which resembles the first in outward appearance (he has his father's seal), with the earnest conjuration to the English King to put the bearers of the letter to death at sight, without respite even for confession. Hamlet puts this letter in place of the other, and the falsification is not detected.

We all know how the critics call that forgery a base crime, and we also know the tenderness and sympathy which is felt for the innocent victims of Hamlet's malice. I would like to know what the critics would have done in Hamlet's place. He had endured intolerable suffering for his cause in order to accomplish it thoroughly and worthily. On his life hangs the possibility of its ultimate success, the revelation of heavenly justice on earth. And now

he is about to be borne to death! As soon as Rosencranz and Guildenstern deliver their letter his head falls! So they must not be allowed to deliver it, but *must* deliver a different one. That is unquestionably clear. If Hamlet allows them to deliver the original letter, he might in truth have said of himself, "O what an ass am I!" But it is said that he could have written something which would endanger neither himself nor them. Does he know or can he find out from them, so that he can rely upon their word, how far they were aware of the King's purpose in sending them, or whether they were not also the bearers of some oral message? What if they should contradict what he might write? What if the King of England should become suspicious and should hold the three fast until he could obtain tidings from Denmark, in which case he would learn that Hamlet was to be put to death? Hamlet might certainly expect this. No, there is no possible way out of the difficulty, there can be no other course for Hamlet than this which he takes. No, *not here nor at any point*

in the whole destiny of Hamlet! That is precisely the point again upon which hangs the correct understanding of the play. Rosencranz and Guildenstern—or himself! These two—or that which to Hamlet is of far greater value than himself—that which to him is most sacred, for which he endures a life full of torture, not for a moment is there any other alternative. He *must* sacrifice Rosencranz and Guildenstern, not even allowing them respite for confession. He *must* do this even, for if they should *confess* after they are seized and made aware of their position, no one could tell what turn affairs might take for him. Even the least pause, the most insignificant delay, may have as its consequence an embassy to Denmark for instructions. It might happen, even if Rosencranz and Guildenstern were to fall, and if their confessions contained anything compromising the Prince, that it would come to the ears of the English King. We may pity Hamlet then for this act if we choose, but we cannot blame him.

But, say the critics, how coldly and unfeel-

ingly he speaks about this deed! How, instead of lamenting their fate, he regards it as something proper and right! The critics outdo themselves in perversity here. Levinstein says:

"In the sacrifice of Rosencranz and Guildenstern we find Hamlet's greatest guilt. Hamlet speaks of 'evil natures'; but what have they done worthy of death? By this guilty act the poet surrenders Hamlet to fate; as a tragic hero he must commit a crime, for not otherwise could he, according to the laws of dramatic art, be worthy of death!"

But the tragedy of Shakespeare must not be blotted with this sort of guilt. It would degrade it. Even an inferior poet would scarcely fulfil his tragic obligation in so poor a fashion. No, the fate of Rosencranz and Guildenstern is just, and Hamlet is right to view it in that light; for both fall as a sacrifice *to the King*, and not to him. They serve him *against the Prince;* that is *their guilt.*

But is this guilt worthy of death? It is not necessary to discuss that. In such service there are always risks of death, one of which they incurred. There is no doubt in the minds

of Rosencranz and Guildenstern that the letter they are carrying contains nothing of advantage for Hamlet, that the journey is not for his welfare; so much it is certain beyond all doubt that Rosencranz and Guildenstern knew. The only justification that could be found for them is, that they might believe that Hamlet as a murderer did not deserve anything good. It cannot be said in their behalf that their duty as subjects called upon them to render the King the desired service; the poet does not represent this motive as the one by which they were influenced, but rather their own willingness to undertake the business, and this was the result of their nature, of their type of character.

Their inclination is to act for the King, and for the King against the Prince as servants, or from some other motive. Whoever undertakes this service of carrying the letter and Hamlet to England must also take all the risks connected with such an errand. The business is dangerous, as such affairs always are. It has been clear enough through the court play what a conflict has been originated. If Rosencranz

and Guildenstern do not take this into account, it is the fault of their shortsightedness or thoughtlessness. They are shortsighted and careless because their ideas and views are wholly based on the favour and gratitude of *this King*. Because of the littleness of their nature they covet that; their baseness is their ruin; they walk, so to speak, within the sphere of a fate which involves perdition, and only because of this strange fate is Hamlet compelled to sacrifice them; they meet this fate, not by Hamlet; he is really only an instrument. Where such a King reigns, his subjects are always exposed to the worst risks possible, and their ruin may come from causes that they cannot foresee. But the end, for the most part, is overlooked because it is always present; even the ground on which all concerned live and move is itself destruction. When they pay the penalty they must not complain. That the hazard and danger of the position have not been considered counts for nothing, for a man should consider them. These are things in which Shakespeare knows no jesting, because he is

so great an expounder of law, the Divine Law, and he holds to it as no second poet has ever done.

Rosencranz and Guildenstern perish justly because they serve the murderer against Hamlet, who is legally acting in the cause of justice, and also because they are not serving God.

That is the great tragical and rational point of view, and there is no higher reason than that of real tragedy. Therefore Shakespeare himself writes the epitaph of Rosencranz and Guildenstern in Hamlet's words:

"Why, man, they did make love to this employment:
They are not near my conscience; their defeat
Does by their own insinuation grow.
'T is dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensed points
Of mighty opposites."

But, say the critics, ought Hamlet to have committed such a serious crime that even his friend can ask in reproachful surprise, "So Guildenstern and Rosencranz go to 't?" Ask? The interrogation mark belongs to the

critics' interpretation and is not in the original text. Wherein lies the proof that Horatio's words express reproachful surprise? Certainly not in the "why, man" with which Hamlet answers. The proof could only consist in assuming that Hamlet had actually committed a crime. But this is not the case. Horatio's words have no other meaning than a recognition of the first real factor of justice. He speaks them in the tone of a man announcing a serious but satisfactory result: "So Guildenstern and Rosencranz go to 't!" and Hamlet, following with "Why, man, they did make love to this employment," gives the clear explanation how it happened that such a fate for them lay in the work which they had undertaken.

Chance separates Hamlet from his travelling companions: a pirate seizes their ship, Hamlet when they grapple falls on the enemy's deck, and the pirate brings him back to the Danish coast in order to get a ransom for him. Rosencranz and Guildenstern sail on to England, and Hamlet cannot warn them not to deliver their letter.

The decision then in the case of Hamlet versus Rosencranz and Guildenstern is simply this: Rosencranz and Guildenstern are so far in the right that they are entitled to consider Hamlet, after he kills Polonius, as a dangerous character of whom anything bad may be expected. Hamlet does not corrupt them; what he plots against them he must without question do, without shrinking and doubt, without any choice. A chance arises which affects the aim for which he lives, and makes their death necessary for that aim; he could not have foreseen this, and he cannot warn them later when the corsair sails away with him.

When, however, he made the thrust through the tapestry, Hamlet committed a grave error, causing the death of Polonius. The destruction of Rosencranz and Guildenstern was also the disastrous consequence of the same error. *Therefore*, on account of that error into which he allowed himself to fall, the original plot of the King is changed; *therefore*, instead of the commission to demand the arrears of tribute, the sentence of Hamlet's death is sent to Eng-

land; *therefore,* Hamlet has to work against it; *therefore,* after an accident has rendered his counter-plotting useless and made it impossible for him to nullify it, these two fall; *therefore,* he himself also falls. For that one error, which has also for its consequence the madness of Ophelia, the poet lets his hero atone *with his own life.*

Not, however, to atone for the blood of these gentlemen—that goes to the King's account and serves to increase the measure of his guilt —but to atone for the offence against his cause which can now be accomplished only by the shedding of his own blood.

And now, in closing, one question: why did not Rosencranz and Guildenstern sail back to Denmark after the Prince had escaped? To take him to England is the purpose of their journey. What is the use of delivering the letter without him? The same chance which was favourable to Hamlet's returning home they could have made use of for themselves, and they certainly would have done so if they could have known what threatened them. Fate

does not allow Rosencranz and Guildenstern to turn back; the destiny that on account of their connection with the King has them as well as him in its clutch and drives them to death. They did not wish to show themselves directly after the failure of the unlucky expedition; besides, the letter which the King has entrusted must be delivered by them as ambassadors sent to a tributary court. They travel on because they do not know what is in the letter; they have no choice, because they are not fully informed concerning the business entrusted to them. Had they been made acquainted with the real object of their mission, they would not perhaps (the King must, at least, have foreseen this possibility) have delivered the letter. Therefore he kept them in the dark. *He* is thus directly accountable for their death, because, designedly kept in ignorance by him, it is possible for them to assume that, besides what relates to the Prince, the letter makes mention of other matters—there has been talk of tribute owing—to which they are bound to attend.

The substituted letter, indeed, causes their death, but only because the King's letter sends them to England, and because after the Prince escapes them they are still bound to execute the King's commands. To him, therefore, their destruction is clearly due.

Polonius falls as these two fall, for the same justice has come upon him as upon them. He falls as a sacrifice to the base devotion of his life to the service of the King, not by the blunder and the dagger-thrust of Hamlet's wrath which are here only secondary instruments of justice. Polonius thrust himself into listening to the interview between Hamlet and his mother. The King did not order him to do it. Rosencranz and Guildenstern were at least under orders from the King, but Polonius acted voluntarily. He was eager to overhear the interview from his own interest in it. He is not specially devoted to the Queen, but only to the King, because he is the one who has the supreme power. He naturally favours the plan of sending the Prince to England, and he adds, on his own account, the advice:

" or confine him where
Your wisdom best shall think."

Hamlet's words are the epitaph that Shakespeare inscribes over Polonius:

" Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!
I took thee for thy better; take thy fortune,
Thou find 'st to be too busy is some danger " ;

and:

" Indeed this counsellor
Is now most still, most secret, and most grave,
Who was in life a foolish prating knave."

But one must understand and sympathise with the bitterness which Hamlet feels that all this should have happened to him; that he should give Polonius the unlucky stroke; and he also comprehends the additional burden that the error will impose upon him. Still more clearly does Hamlet see the wicked ways of a crowned criminal which involve all who are near his person; and he sees too that whoever shall expose the guilt of the criminal must also be entangled in the links of this diabolical chain.

One must feel this bitterness of Hamlet and

understand that his words are not incongruous, but rather in complete harmony with the situation. Therefore later Hamlet says:

"For this same lord,
I do repent; but heaven hath pleas'd it so,
To punish me with this and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.
I will bestow him, and will answer well
The death I gave him."

Hamlet can do this certainly before the world, if his task comes to be known to the world, and by God's grace, he dares hope that he will be judged according to the measure of destiny that has fallen upon him. And as he drags away the corpse his mother tells us that he wept over what had happened. And Hamlet's tears mean so much more than those of most men!

VIII

After the complaint of the critics against Hamlet to which I have referred comes the more difficult one regarding his conduct towards Ophelia. How is that to be regarded?

Goethe paints Ophelia after this fashion:

"Her character is depicted with a few masterstrokes. Her whole being is involved in ripe, sweet sensuousness. Her love for the Prince to whose hand she ventures to aspire flows spontaneously, her heart so abandons itself to her impulses that father and brother are both afraid; both plainly and directly warn her. Her imagination is captivated, her quiet modesty breathes a loving desire, and should the convenient goddess Opportunity shake the tree the fruit would quickly fall."

Referring to the songs that Ophelia sings in her insanity Goethe says:

"In this strange unseemliness is a marked signifi-

cance. We know from the beginning of the play with what the mind of the good child is occupied. How often must she, like an indiscreet nurse, have tried to sing her passion to sleep with words that can only excite it the more! At last when all power over herself is destroyed and the tongue speaks what the heart feels, this tongue becomes her betrayer, and in the innocence of insanity she gives utterance to her reminiscences of these songs."

"The innocence of insanity!" None but a poet could have written that phrase! From her singing these songs, from her conversation with Laertes in the beginning of the play, from Hamlet's harsh and equivocal talk with her and her answers to him, some critics have assumed that she has been seduced by Hamlet, ignoring the fact that such language was not unusual in the Danish court or everywhere in that age. Regardless of all this, Tieck and von Friesen come to the conclusion that Ophelia had been betrayed by the Prince. I cannot consent to any such view. I maintain that the words of Laertes—

"Lay her i' the earth;
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
May violets spring!"

positively refute it. They are Shakespeare's own answer to the slander, and Shakespeare is never guilty of an untruth. Hamlet himself has said to Ophelia:

"Be thou chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny."

What her nature and temperament were, however, could not be more clearly expressed than in Goethe's words. But—what is more important—what has she to suffer by means of Hamlet, and how has he sinned against her? All the cry that has been raised about this comes from the fact already dwelt upon, that no one seems to understand Hamlet's situation. The bond of honest affection binds him to Ophelia. It does not become either in him or in her a passion which is of absolute power—there is no circumstance pointing to that—but Hamlet loves the charming maiden warmly and heartily, and he would never break the ties of that love unless driven to it by his destiny.

As soon as the ghost of his father spoke to him and he comprehended the nature of the task imposed upon him there was no possibility that anything else should dominate him, even if it had been dearer and therefore nearer to him than this relation with Ophelia. Even this help has been withdrawn from Hamlet by the poet, namely, that he should feel urged to make the loved one a confidant of his trouble and his secret. Ophelia is not the person for that by her nature, education, or habits. She is bound up in her family life. It is Ophelia who turns from Hamlet and shows him an unfriendly spirit. She is not naturally his equal. Her mind does not reach out beyond the circle of her environment, beyond this court, beyond this life in Elsinore. She is a lovely flower, a May rose which has blossomed in this poisonous atmosphere. Hamlet has appreciated her charm, but now the mouth of the grave opens, the night comes, which will eventually become day for Hamlet, but this night with its icy breath takes from him all that before had been comfort and happiness. What one might call in

life a rose can never more bloom for him. Hamlet ought not from that time to be capable of joy, much less of love or the tenderness of passionate devotion. Besides, the crime of his mother fills him with disgust against her sex. The revelation of the ghost is a warning as well as a death-warrant to him. He has a foreboding of his own end, for the very ground upon which he stands is quaking. Out of this dark and threatening feeling come all of Hamlet's utterances.

Shakespeare has treated his hero with a severity unheard of in the world of tragic creation, and in all respects without a parallel. He has taken *everything* away from Hamlet, *every help, every comfort, every possibility of a favourable issue.* The play, acted before the King, is his only success, and even in that he has been baffled. If Hamlet had not been summoned to revenge, if it had not been *his* duty but rather that of another, that most terrible fact of knowing of this criminality which touches him so nearly and which he must keep as a secret would be terrible of itself! Only to

Horatio can he reveal himself, only to him does Hamlet disclose it, so that at least one person on the face of the earth besides himself shall know his dire necessity and believe in him. But even from him can Hamlet expect no positive help. Hamlet is thus isolated with his pain and his inward torture, torn from all the former associations of his life, separated from his past by the monstrous revelation to which he alone has listened; every impulse, every ardent desire, every aspiration which springing up directly within himself constitutes his individuality, wherein he finds or has found contentment or enjoyed satisfaction, becomes thereby suppressed in the tension of the desperate combat in which all within him must become harsh, bitter, dissonant; the freedom of action and the freedom of contemplation are taken away; the voice of his conscience, which is so pure, is heard only as an accusation against himself at the will of the tumult which the obligation to duty excites within him; and, if one judge him merely by his utterances, he who is so entirely in the right may appear forgetful of

duty and a coward, and must *endure* his helplessness as the punishment which is involved in the difficulty of his task.

Because Hamlet *ought to do what no one can do and what he must still desire to do*—that is the tragic destiny to which the poet has assigned him. By the power of this destiny Hamlet is snatched away from his relations with Ophelia; she is placed as far away from him as if she were on another planet, and the paternal demand which from out of the grave tears him from her weighs more heavily upon him than when Ophelia, at her father's command, unresisting and obedient, breaks with her lover, returns his letters, entraps him into a conversation of which the direct consequence to him will be that his enemy shall see through him and determine to send him to England.

All these facts are ignored by the critics who blame Hamlet. They talk of "a clever caprice to which Hamlet coldbloodedly and deliberately sacrifices the happiness of the loved one."

How Hamlet feels for Ophelia, and how

heavily the parting from her weighs upon him, is evident from Ophelia's own report of his visit to her. When she gives his presents back to him, she says:

"My lord, I have remembrances of yours
That I have longed long to re-deliver;
I pray you, now receive them,"

and not understanding the really tender feeling in the reply—

"No, not I;
I never gave you aught"—

continues:

"My honour'd lord, I know right well you did,
And with them words of so sweet breath compos'd
As made the things more rich; their perfume lost,
Take these again, for to the noble mind
Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.
There, my lord"—

pressing the gifts upon him, as if he had broken the relation, as if she much more than himself had been "denied entrance," and had had her letters returned; so that he is at the very least

justified in becoming bitter over it: "Ha, ha! are you honest!"—not as if *he knew* best of all that *she was not*, but rather from anger and scorn at the dissimulation which she, in obedience to others, has adopted towards him, while he had just as much right to say "I loved you not" as she "I was the more deceived." But his "I loved you not" means once for all "The love which I felt is as if it had never been; I cannot and dare not love any longer." Hamlet expresses himself in this manner in order to take away every hope of a continuance of their relations that she may have. He dares not tell her the true reason; he puts behind him the bitterness which the conduct of his own mother had caused him. And then his tenderness for Ophelia breaks out in the words:

"Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? To a nunnery, go, and quickly too!"

Hamlet can say nothing better to her under the circumstances. By no clearer expression can he thrust aside his love while concealing it from her.

But he murders her father! Yes, his hand did it, but through whose fault was it that he made the blind thrust? In truth the crowned murderer has cursed them all. Ought Hamlet to break out in complaints over Ophelia's loss after the deed had happened when he is powerless before the law; and when he is at the terrible turning-point where his heart stands still from fright and despair on account of his error? Hamlet has no words for Ophelia and his tears flow over the corpse of Polonius? He knows nothing of her insanity nor of her death; both occur while he is on his way to England. After he returns to Denmark, on his way through the churchyard chance gives him the view of her obsequies, and from the words of Laertes he learns both facts. Here his tongue is loosened when the full weight of this painful burden suddenly falls upon him. His own woe and the miserable fate of the loved one loosen it. *Therefore* he outdoes Laertes. *Not* in order to outdo him, but out of despair over Ophelia's fate, and because the raging of Laertes seems like a mockery of his own grief. That

insanity should end her days makes Hamlet rave. How strongly that thought seizes hold upon him! And when he asks Laertes later:

"Hear you, sir,
What is the reason that you use me thus?
I lov'd you ever"—

so he did in very truth, for he did not feel himself and could not feel himself guilty in his soul for the unhappiness that came to the brother and sister, although it was his arm that brought it upon them. That Laertes, on account of the crime, should call down upon his accursed head ten times threefold woe even now when he has suffered unspeakably himself on account of it—this excess of severity must rouse his wild grief to anger in which he cries out:

"What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis? whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wandering stars, and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers?"

and then he leaps into the grave with the words,

"This is I,
Hamlet the Dane!"

He knows well to what his destiny has brought him, and what woe do these words express! They mean, "Who is it that complains and dares complain? Not you, who, in truth, cannot measure grief with me. I am the one! I!"

The true reason of Ophelia's insanity is that which prevails throughout the whole action; the breath of the grave and of murder is about her; the crime that has been committed destroys even her. Hamlet, however, *appears* insane, he who knows the truth, and who must endure in silence because he is called to action; but Ophelia in her passivity becomes really insane, inasmuch as the effect from the terrible cause of which she knows nothing is forced upon her; the effect is of such a disastrous nature that her brain is destroyed.

After her agitated conversation with Hamlet she cries out:

"And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That suck'd the honey of his music vows,
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason

Like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh,
That unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy. O, woe is me,
To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!"

Can any one believe that all this has no effect upon her? During the same night her father is murdered by her lover whom she believes insane; and the only being in the world who is left to her, her brother Laertes, is far away! These combined strokes one after another overcome her normal balance. The King murders all, even Ophelia. The night which enwrapped her spirit led her to *find,* not seek, death in the river and exempted her from taking refuge in the cloister.

Now follows Hamlet's conversation with Horatio, in which he tells his friend of his experiences with Rosencranz and Guildenstern. To Horatio's exclamation, "Why, what a King is this!" he replies:

"Does it not, thinks 't thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my mother,
Popp'd in between the election and my hopes,

Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage—is 't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? and is 't not to be damn'd,
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?"

How full of meaning is this! And yet it has not been understood. It is the continuation of the last soliloquy:

"O, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!"

And how does Horatio answer Hamlet's words?

"It must be shortly known to him from England
What is the issue of the business there";

and this answer is a significant one. It is Shakespeare's explanation of *his* conception of his hero. To the burning, passionate question of Hamlet in pursuance of the action which the common misunderstanding requires of him from the first moment, his truest friend, who is thoroughly acquainted with all the facts, in this most pressing moment so near the crisis, has no direct answer to give, no assenting yes,

no advice to strike; instead he recognises the crisis of the situation, that the King must soon learn that Hamlet knows what he has undertaken against him; and therefore, for the second time, they will be unmasked for each other. Horatio's words mean only this: "A decision must come soon, there is no alternative"—no more than this, in spite of the approaching crisis. What else can he wish to express than: "Yes, and if you now deal the blow how will the matter be helped thereby?" The *absolute* proof is certainly lacking. Horatio's words are only the climax of the demeanour that he has shown throughout the whole play towards the Prince. He must indeed see a stronger reason for delaying the dagger-stroke than the one which the critics advance. Horatio can now give him no advice in the case and it must be for the same reason as heretofore.

After this conversation comes the invitation to the fencing-match. Hamlet is aroused, but is very weary. He feels the foreboding of the coming fate, but he feels also that he is ready and quietly awaits it.

In this frame of mind, when in his soul all earthly ties are loosened, he speaks to Laertes, begging his pardon so truly, so heartily, so nobly and kindly. He has already said to Horatio:

"It will be short: the interim is mine;
And a man's life 's no more than to say 'One.'
But I am very sorry, good Horatio,
That to Laertes I forgot myself;
For, by the image of my cause, I see
The portraiture of his."

To Laertes he utters at last the full, clear truth of the matter:

"Give me your pardon, sir; I 've done you wrong,
But pardon 't, as you are a gentleman.
This presence knows,
And you must needs have heard, how I am punish 'd
With sore distraction. What I have done
That might your nature, honour, and exception
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
Was 't Hamlet wrong 'd Laertes? Never Hamlet!
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,

And when he 's not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not; Hamlet denies it.
Who does it, then? His madness; if 't be so,
Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd,
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.
Sir, in this audience,
Let my disclaiming from a purpos'd evil
Free me so far in your most generous thoughts,
That I have shot mine arrow o'er the house
And hurt my brother."

That is the truth! The necessity of Hamlet's task, his grievous fate that alienated him from himself whereby he appeared insane, *that is the enemy* of Laertes, and not of him alone. *It is the King* who has ruined all, *he alone* has plotted against all those who have been drawn into crime by him. Hamlet can and must here before Laertes with absolute truth call his condition, his soul-sorrow, insanity, because this sorrow had been shown before others under the mask of insanity, and because every one, with the exception of Horatio, believed it to be insanity.

And how does Laertes stand at this moment in relation to the Prince! How far he stands

below him, burdened with the crime he is preparing to perpetrate! Here we see the marked contrast which the poet has made in the action of Laertes and of Hamlet. Laertes stirs up a revolt, and a very threatening one; he overpowers the royal guard; with naked sword he makes his way to the King, whose very life is at his mercy. But in a trice the King has subdued him, by means of the unwarlike gift which he possesses in the highest degree, the gift of domination. The practical man allows himself to be controlled by the criminal as a wild animal by the magic of his keeper's glance. It only requires a few words, the earnestness of a well-formed purpose, and the storm is over and what had risen to mountain height in Laertes has subsided.

And what further action does the practical, manly Laertes take? He allows himself to be ensnared by the subtlety of the King, and is led by him into the most shameful villainy,—to secretly choose, like an assassin, in honest knightly combat an unblunted blade, because under the veil of honest play he can thus strike his unarmed combatant, who has a blunted

rapier, and who is to be *invited* to this play, so that Laertes may revenge himself without any personal danger. Laertes yields to this atrocity from lack of judgment and honour, for if he had been endowed with either of these, the nature of the plan must have given him insight into the character of its originator; and if until now he had suspected nothing of the malice of the King, this plot would clearly reveal it and frighten him away from the tempter. Laertes indeed not only allows himself to be pleased that the King should plan for Hamlet (as he had formerly planned for Hamlet's father) a poisonous drink for his refreshment at the combat, but, as if this were not enough, Laertes suggests a poison which *he will use himself*. He has such a poison and will anoint his rapier with it, because he knows that if his opponent is merely scratched he will be inevitably lost! When Laertes himself falls, what is his fate? Most shameful, for he shares the fate of the King. "Caught!" he cries:

"Why, as a woodcock to mine own springe;
I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery. . .
Exchange forgiveness with me,"

and calling him "noble Hamlet," he dies with this tribute to his opponent. That is the picture of "energy" that Shakespeare in Laertes places in striking contrast to Hamlet's inaction! As I have said before, Hamlet *lets* the combat come and has said: "It will be short; the interim is mine"; and it *is* Hamlet's, eternally Hamlet's, even before Fortinbras and the messengers from England have arrived, who are already near Elsinore. Hamlet and Laertes fight; in the third bout the combatants exchange weapons, and Hamlet wounds Laertes with the poisoned rapier. How this could occur is certainly not clear from the stage-direction. How did the rapier of Laertes get into Hamlet's hand? That is an obscure point. Laertes says, "Have at you now," and then he wounds Hamlet, and the King gives the command, "Part them, they are incens'd." At this point Osric cries: "Look to the Queen there, ho!" As she swoons Horatio, standing by, calls out: "They bleed on both sides. How is it, my lord." So it goes on, stroke on stroke, and the question recurs, How did Hamlet come

by the rapier of Laertes? From the explanation which we owe to von Friesen (1869) we know that there was no mere *seizing* of the weapon on Hamlet's part, but a fencing manœuvre takes place—that of disarming with the left hand. The French translator of the play, Le Tourneur, had, as von Friesen mentions, added to the stage-direction the significant words, "Ils se *désarment* et changent," etc., evidently understanding the manœuvre, which von Friesen describes as follows:

"As soon as one combatant has made a thrust and is on the point of returning to his defence, the other gives a powerful downward stroke on the blade of his opponent in order to turn the rapier aside, while at the same time he advances his left foot close to the outside of the right foot of his opponent; and with his left hand he seizes the guard of the other's rapier, and endeavours by a powerful downward pressure to wrest it from his grasp. When this manœuvre succeeds, the point of his own rapier is put against the breast of his opponent, who is compelled to declare himself overcome. If the opponent does not succeed in resisting the manœuvre by which he is deprived

of the possibility of warding off the attack, nothing remains for him except to resort to the same manœuvre by grasping the weapon of his assailant. With fighters of equal activity this is the usual result, whereby the fencers change places and the combat is continued. The manœuvre is attended with the greatest danger, and has therefore gone out of use. In Shakespeare's time, however, it was probably well known and might occur in any fencing bout, and any experienced actor would understand the stage-direction. This explains perfectly how Hamlet and Laertes exchanged rapiers."

But now another question occurs, which demands explanation; what prompts Hamlet to this manœuvre? *Because he feels that he is wounded? No!* Hamlet knows that he is hit, but in the heat of the combat he does not notice that he is wounded. In his eagerness he loses no time, as soon as he has been hit, to resort to that bold manœuvre with which he is familiar and he succeeds in it because his recent practice comes to his aid. Nothing now remains for Laertes to do but to resort to the same manœuvre, thus seizing Hamlet's rapier with his left

hand. The King cries out as soon as he sees this, "Part them, they are incens'd." But they have already changed places, and with Hamlet's words, "Nay, come again," the fourth bout begins. As Laertes is hit with a powerful thrust, the Queen falls. Osric perceiving this cries, "Look to the Queen there," and Horatio, hastening to Hamlet, says, "They bleed on both sides"—from which Hamlet learns for the *first time* that he is wounded! Disregarding it, however, his attention being absorbed by the fainting of his mother, Hamlet has only one thought—"How does the Queen?" Hearing from her that she is poisoned, he cries out:

> "O villainy!—Ho! Let the door be lock'd!
> Treachery! Seek it out!"—

ever thinking of his mother. He receives now from Laertes while he is sinking to the ground the full terrible explanation: "It is here, Hamlet!" Hamlet's execution of the difficult manœuvre in the heat of the combat is astonishing. When at last he knows all, he breaks out with the fierce cry, "The point envenom'd too!" Yes, *this* moment of his surprise, so great that he

does not notice the wound which brings death to him, is the chief point of the *whole action*, and *from that* springs the true, terrible dramatic effect. If Hamlet had felt the wound immediately after he received it, he would have sprung upon Laertes and wrested the rapier from him. That Hamlet continues the *combat as such* and commences a new round with these significant words, "Nay, come again," proves beyond doubt that he does not notice the wound, and that he becomes possessed of the weapon of Laertes by the fighting manœuvre of disarming him.

IX

"THE interim is mine," says Hamlet, and it is. Ere it has passed he has accomplished his task—in his last hour, when death has seized him, even by his death, with the help of the invisible participants who have stood at his side from the beginning.

Goethe says: "When men, contrary to their desire, are dragged into an unforeseen catastrophe by outward conditions, it must always be terrible and in the highest sense tragic; and it *brings guilt and innocence, arising from independent deeds*, in unfortunate connection."

What destiny is and how it works is well stated here. In the clear objective of human knowledge it is a catastrophe the main course of which is concealed from man.

That, however, is looking at it from only one side. The broader view regards the purpose of destiny. What does the catastrophe bring to ourselves? What *is or ought to be* the aim of

destiny in the tragedy? Why does it occur?

The *act* of the person is the material; the import, however, which is developed by means of this material, is the fulfilment. All tragedy is a promulgation of justice. In *Hamlet* it concerns a crime which calls for *Divine justice,* because human power in this case is impotent. It has to be accomplished in a natural way, by earthly means; this happens so indirectly at first as to be inconceivable to the understanding of the mortal most deeply interested, because it is so loosely connected with him. It is also inconceivable to the wicked man, who does not avoid it and cannot be on his guard against it, because he has as little presentiment of the events which lie hidden under these conditions *as the avenger has of the help they will bring to him.*

The action, however, will be made clear in the result, and our knowledge advances from the beginning until the law is found, because we see from reflection that destiny and the progress of the action emanate from God. "There 's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow." The soul of the Prince is filled with this faith.

The eye that eternally sees is ever over Hamlet. In Goethe's criticism destiny appears without this background, and not as the agency of divine power, not as an impersonal form of providential operation. It has, however, *these characteristics in Hamlet*, and is, therefore, more awful than terrible, because it seems to come from a source that confounds human intelligence. It is awful when its power goes beyond our idea of justice, leaving this unsatisfied, as in the case of Ophelia.

Everything in the play follows directly from the crime, the murder committed by the designing King. This crime is of such a diabolical nature that the very sepulchre rejects it, so monstrous that nature allows the voice of the murdered man to be heard by his son. Aside from this ghostly message nothing but human power and earthly means enter into the drama, but there is a spirit greater than the human which gives its assistance. So with spiritual help (in this sense) Hamlet solves his problem, and solves it clearly and fully, and with the precision of Divine power.

In what does this help consist? Something very wonderful in this particular instance, much more remarkable than the intervention of the ghostly accuser who enjoins the task. The commonest and nearest means is made use of for the fulfilment, and the enemy, against the peculiar bent of his disposition, meets the avenger half-way to help him in his desperate purpose and to help him against himself (the enemy). The criminal is prompted to do this, baited to his detsruction, as it were, by chances of an inscrutable nature, coming undesired and unexpected to him, not recognised for their real value—occurrences which we call chance, but which become spirit-arms for Hamlet, carrying him forward as by a whirlwind to his goal. By means of these chances, the criminal is brought to judgment. These chances shape destiny.

I have repeatedly spoken of the King, but this is the place to consider his character as the second person of the play.

The masterly power with which Shakespeare has delineated this sinner cannot be sufficiently

admired—this Claudius, so paltry by nature and so terrible in his activity; so small in himself and so great in deed; so repugnant to us as a person, and so interesting on account of his career and end. Inwardly he is naught; "dull" towards heaven and hell, with no conception of justice, so worthless, so low morally that even if he cries out—

> "O wretched state! O bosom black as death!
> O limed soul, that struggling to be free
> Art more engag'd!"—

this acknowledgment only comes out of the unworthy feeling, "all may be well." In this utterance he is detestable. It is the preliminary of that addressed later to Laertes, as he completes the plot against Hamlet:

> "An hour of quiet shortly shall we see,
> Till then in patience our proceeding be."

This "patience" springs out of that "all may yet be well" which his trick has in reserve for its aid. In that he hopes; what he calls "well" is the *enjoyment* of the fruit of his crime, for *inordinate desire* fills him in place of every other

passion. He *fears* only the deprivation of this *enjoyment;* he will even do penance in order not to be deprived of it. All ideals, all morality, are for him a mere theory; his head and not his heart knows prayer and repentance. His knees *ought* to bend; his *words* in which he is so gifted never end. He cries to the angels to aid him. Not to him can the spirit of his murdered King and brother appear. No voice from out the grave can reach him. What does not pertain to flesh and blood does not move him. He can be terrorized only by his own portrait in the mirror of the play. But the horror does not act on him as it would on a different man; he runs away from it; the surprise overcomes him, but he meditates a plot out of it. This is his character, this is the stuff of which he is made.

But he knows how to appear most imposing outwardly, always secure, prompt, flattering, regal, ever giving keen advice, courteously exclusive, versatile in conversation, resolute, sharp-sighted, always resourceful, equal to all vicissitudes, invincible by his position; his

weapon poison, his screen secrecy; so tenacious in his egotism that even the fate of his wife—for he knows that she has drunk death—does not make him lose his perfect self-control or prevent his striving for his personal security by the continuation of the combat; and when he has fallen in death, when he himself is stabbed by Hamlet, even then he will tell *one more lie* to the world.

That is the enemy! unassailable, invincible because of his position. Corporeally he is certainly assailable and as vunerable as any other man, for the King is mortal. But what does that signify? Nothing at all. In all that he represents to others, to the world, he is unassailable in his dignity and the honour of his name, in his disposition, in his lies, in his gift of hypocrisy, and in the depth of his criminality. Thus in his actual condition as a man, in what he appears to be, he *is* unassailable. That Hamlet ought to do anything against the criminal corporeally, ignoring his actual personality, is such a gross error that not even a word is necessary to refute it.

In what tragedy, I ask, does there occur the assassination of the guilty person without any evidence of guilt being produced for the truth of the drama and the satisfaction of the persons concerned? But the difficulty of producing this evidence and the apparent impossibility of convicting the guilty person is the *cardinal point in Hamlet!* and therefore to kill the King *before* the proof is adduced would be not the killing of the guilty person but *killing the proof*, not the execution of the criminal but the *murder of justice!* Justice would be struck down by the destruction of its only means of triumph; the tragic action would degenerate into the action of mere brutes. This senseless blow for which the critics are so impatient would be a strange, outrageous blow across the clear eyes of the understanding.

The criminal himself has his fate in his own hands; only with his own help can he be vanquished; he must make himself assailable; he himself must do what is sure to bring about his ruin—*and he does it*—does it by means of his own tool and device—by means of the fencing

match, which he plans with the aid of Laertes. In order to make himself absolutely secure for all time he devises the precaution behind whose revengeful wrath craft is hidden. In Laertes the King believes he has found what he needed. In this person who has no interest whatever in his crime, who is so completely filled with his own concerns, so wild in his anger and in his enmity to Hamlet, the King recognises the friend who will deliver him from his own enemy and make him secure for life; but Laertes is in reality his evil angel, driving him into the power of justice. He becomes, as it were, the partner in Hamlet's task, and *gives to the world complete evidence of the King's guilt.*

Hamlet is now rendered inactive, but *the King acts* and thereby becomes that which he is, in the meaning and the plan of the author, namely, *the second person in the play. He* now takes *the offensive,* that fatal rôle, so propitious for the avenger, so decisive of the result.

Hamlet as assailant has well-nigh paralysed himself; the first dramatic movement comes to a rest; at this rest the second movement begins.

It is no less important than the first, which unfolds the peculiar action of the criminal. Therefore the fourth act belongs to the King, and it is these two movements of the persons interchanging one with the other which constitute the *action of the play*, and which are united and concluded in each other, the persons making these movements neither understanding nor controlling the action.

This is *the main action!* To look for it, as Schlegel does, only in what Hamlet does, proves that he had no understanding of the drama.

If these scenes are only played in the spirit in which they are conceived and composed, when all this restlessness under the calm exterior of majesty, under the drapery of the purple, this worthlessness, this diabolical wrath, become apparent to the world, then will the action of the concealed divinity be heard in every word of the play, from the very beginning to the final catastrophe.

The rapidity of pressing events in the fourth act, the detailed, minute preparation at the end of the act, and the apparent block in the

fifth, are the foreshadowings of the catastrophe, the calm that often precedes the bursting of the tempest, the gathering clouds in which the thunderbolt of fated revenge is engendered.

This is the explanation of Hamlet's behaviour and of all his utterances in the last act. So far as he had the power *he has done his work, partly* for the task he has to perform, *partly against himself, not against the task,* for that is impossible, because it is just and because he was guided by the heavenly powers, and therefore what he did *against himself* becomes *active for good* in the hands of those powers. Hamlet is needed no more to lead, it is only for the execution of judgment that he is to be further used; his arm and his life are still necessary, no longer his mind, his wit, and his patience. Hamlet is *already at the goal,* although he does not know it.

Hence the mood of repose in which he appears in the churchyard, the tone of a man who has done all that he can and has nothing more to do, the disgust at the finite nature of things, the melancholy and sickening sense of mortality

which fill him. It is this feeling which finds expression in his meditation upon the skull, in his horribly witty, bitter-sweet talk. It is with this feeling that he follows Alexander's dust until he finds it stopping a bung-hole and makes the rhyme:

"Imperious Cæsar, dead and turn'd to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away;
O, that that earth, which kept the world in awe,
Should patch a wall to expel the winter's flaw!"

The grave-digger tempts him to his fantastic comments upon the dust of death in keeping with his present frame of mind. He himself stands close to the dark portal.

To the same feelings in the following scene are due his lassitude and the apparent incoherency in his talk, when in reply to Horatio's remark—"It must be shortly known to him from England what is the issue of the business there"—he says:

"It will be short: the interim is mine;
And a man's life 's no more than to say 'One.'
But I am very sorry, good Horatio,
That to Laertes I forgot myself;

For by the image of my cause I see
The portraiture of his;"

and afterwards:

"I shall win at the odds. But thou wouldst not think how ill all 's here about my heart; but it is no matter."

And yet he says "We defy augury." That he disregards, feeling that he rests in the lap of that Providence which is over all the world. *He feels himself prepared,* and therefore allows himself to become jocose and to ridicule the fop who invites him in the fatal fencing. More seriously he says:

"There 's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 't is not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. Since no man knows aught of what he leaves, what is 't to leave betimes? Let be."

It is the influence of the Divine power by which every nerve in Hamlet is already stimulated and under whose spiritual control he stands.

Furthermore, the wicked man must destroy

himself in his own peculiar way, after his own inclinations, by fresh crimes *to which he is enticed and urged by means of Hamlet's attack.* These fresh crimes he believes will bury and forever hide the old ones, but these very crimes come at last to the light of day *through his own action,* his own calculation, his own craft, his own most cunning malice. The more artfully he spins the thread for Hamlet's destruction, the more inextricably does it entangle himself. His master-stroke becomes his own destruction.

What are the circumstances by which the criminal is lured on to judgment and by which the Divine Helper, in the form of accident, assists the avenger and carries him forward without his being able to see how surely and swiftly the end is attained? By the players' coming to Elsinore, by the pirates meeting with Hamlet and bringing him back to Denmark, and, above all, by the accident of Polonius's death. *That is the decisive event!* That gives Hamlet the victory.

To the Indian the gods are recognisable by their eyes, which never wink; thus out of

this accident looks the eyes of the *goal,*—the pure light of the solution—undazzled, without shadow, sure, eternally firm, not an eyelid quivering.

Hamlet's *miss proves to be the hit*—because it is *his miss,* not *his hit,* but the *hit of Fate.* That is the most secret point in Hamlet's fate-guided course, the most hidden from himself. That is the most brilliant feature in the invention of Shakespeare, the turning-point of the play, the thing *inwardly accomplished* but outwardly apparent only in the catastrophe. This accidental death of Polonius is *the death of all,* but it also unmasks the criminal. Through that thrust by which Hamlet, in blind wrath, *tries to hit* the King and *does not hit* him, by this thrust the King *is really hit;* but only because Hamlet has *not* in reality hit him, therefore he is *in truth* hit, so hit that *the truth comes to light!* On this account Hamlet himself falls but his task is fulfilled, through the help which was secretly inherent and latent in his error in killing Polonius. By the death of Polonius, Hamlet stirs up against himself a

vengeance similar to that which he has to inflict, but merely similar—it has no righteous claim to his life; and since, nevertheless, on account of it he suffers death, therefore it assists him *to do what he is bound to do.* And it assists him *because the criminal whom he is to punish avails himself of the error in order to secure himself and destroy Hamlet.*

Because it becomes a weapon in the hand of the wicked King, because it is used in his service against nature and justice in order to destroy the divinely appointed avenger of the royal crime, it becomes a means of bringing this crime to light and bringing about its just punishment. Such is the wonderful complication presented to us. Hamlet is involved in the cause; he cannot choose his plan, for it strides on before him. And yet this has been called "the hero's having no plan." This is the *positive* import of that negative expression. He allows himself to be led; in that he is ever intelligent and passive in the broadest sense, for he understands the difficulties of his task, understands in fear and agony; and thus he goes straight to the heart of the crime. And

by no means slowly.[1] The preposterous idea that he goes slowly has come to be generally accepted only from the silly desire that he should kill the King immediately.

The drama knows of no delay! The fulfilment, the judgment, even the death of the King, come quicker than Hamlet or we could have foreseen. All is accomplished *with one stroke*, in overwhelming surprise! *Now* Hamlet *may* strike the King down, *now* at last when he himself is dying, *now* he may *harken to his blood* when his blood is flowing! and *now* his thrust cannot injure the cause; it seals and fulfils it, but *never until this last moment* when Laertes and the Queen have also fallen.

The bloody havoc has been regarded by the critics as useless. Justice and her poet know better what blood is demanded in expiation and who is her debtor for the royal crime. Even now the King makes no confession. Death

[1] Consider how short is the space of time from the beginning of the second act—only a few days. This fact escapes notice because the text is so rich and deep, the subject so great, Hamlet's task so difficult, and his suffering so intense. It is this *inner* infinity that makes the process *seem* long.

opens his mouth only for a lie, not for acknowledgment of the truth; but his own confession is no longer needed. Laertes confesses for him, and the corpse of the Queen and the blood of the Prince unite to proclaim the murderer to all the world. Now too Ophelia and Polonius, Rosencranz and Guildenstern, testify against him. All these victims of his crime now form the chorus to the solo of the Ghost, and when Horatio comes forward to tell Hamlet's story and to explain his cause to the unsatisfied, he will produce in all his hearers the conviction which he himself has and which we have, and the story which the grave told will be an unquestioned truth for the world—*now* when Hamlet lives no more on earth and is no longer a party in the drama.

When the play is thus understood—its foundation, its progress, its aim,—when the purpose of the action and its method and meaning are thus comprehended, then the harmony of these significant passages rings with the power of a refrain:

"Our wills and fates do so contrary run
That our devices still are overthrown;"

and Hamlet's weighty words:

"Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well,
When our deep plots do fail; and that should teach us
There 's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will;"

and while he is dying:

"So tell him with the occurents more or less
Which have solicited."

Tell what! Hamlet does not tell us because it is impossible; he is dying. *Therefore* "the rest is silence!" But Horatio says at the close:

"And let me speak to the yet unknowing world
How these things came about: so shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fallen on the inventors' heads. All this can I
Truly deliver."

How energetically Hamlet *acts* in his *passivity!* He puts his cause in motion and the motion to a goal—*he alone*, by *means of the play!* That

is *Hamlet's act!* And it is the *genuine, practical* proof demanded for fulfilling his task.

Hamlet seizes upon the very first chance—that of the actors' coming to Elsinore—to which everything else is joined. Hamlet views their coming not as something strange and extraordinary, but as immanent means directly sent for his advantage. Thus Shakespeare has glorified his own heart's task—the drama—making this mirror of the mind the means of displaying justice to the world; for Hamlet's play is the *life impetus of the action.* From this play Hamlet obtains *convincing* proof, and out of it, above all, comes *confession,* although only for himself and Horatio at first. It is devised wisely, for only by that means is it possible to make the dead crime live again, to call back the Ghost and have his declaration heard by all. Everything else follows: Hamlet's mistaken thrust at Polonius, the plot of the King against him, the catastrophe, and the judgment!

Hamlet has loyally served the Eternal, even unto death. Therefore there is a positive significance in Horatio's words:

"Now cracks a noble heart.—Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!"

His poet has thus buried him. He has interred no one of his heroes more beautifully, and the funeral oration for the world comes from the mouth of Fortinbras:

"Let four captains
Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage,
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have prov'd most royally; and, for his passage,
The soldiers' music and the rites of war
Speak loudly for him."

That is the tragedy of Hamlet! The play is not the *hero nor the character*, but *the action.*

Hamlet has reason as well as passion; full of the spirit of his task, as a noble and true hero he sets himself about the tragic atonement without making a false step at the start. He wins by the service he gives to the task, by the destiny arising from it, by his aim and action. Nothing but this service comes from Hamlet, nothing that can be explained as personal desire. He exists wholly for the task. He acts ever in its shadow, in the twilight of

its inspiration, in its assurance and its torment. That is *Hamlet's attraction, his character, his originality.* It is this wonderful *clair-obscur* that gives the piece its tone.

The goal must be a feast of death. For only by this destruction comes the unmasking of the criminal who *never confesses;* yet by means of this "havoc" it is possible *without his confession* to complete the proof of his guilt.

The hero falls, but not on account of any guilt. In blind haste he gave a death-stroke that he did not intend and for which his soul cannot feel guilty. It was more an accident which humbles him than a deed which torments him; his conscience is free.

Hamlet's life is clear from any offence, but one that can have no happiness; so death is no punishment and no misfortune, but rather a release, a discharge, a deliverance, his well-deserved *quietus est !*

This play, in its depth, draws the soul to the abyss over which the mystery hovers which Shakespeare allows us to perceive but not to uncover. It represents essentially reality even

in its gloom. Shakespeare extends his art to the unfathomable, and his limit is where our knowledge ends, but Shakespeare has made even this mysterious realm his own, *not* to explain the unfathomable, but to give us a human soul whom the riddle of destiny has carried beyond this world.

Our knowledge is piece-work, but *we can do* more than we can foresee.

That is the acme of life, the freedom of man on earth, where, pressed upon by sorrow and death, genius and love accomplish their wonders. Such are we; and we are comforted by our experiences insomuch that they bring to us what we may make out of ourselves and what the grave hides from us.

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